A

MYSTERY STILL

BOULEVARD NOVELS

HALF-A-CROWN

THE BOULEVARD NOVELS.

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Academy, June 25, 1887.

THE BOULEVARD NOVELS.

IX.

A MYSTERY STILL.

BY

FORTUNÉ DU BOISGOBEY.

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A MYSTERY STILL.

I.

It is evening; an evening which fell during the course of the warm and rainy winter which is with us now.

The time is ten o'clock. A fine rain is beating on the windows of a suite of rooms in the Rue de l'Arcade, a street gloomy and unfashionable; carriage traffic has almost deserted it since the opening of the Boulevard Malesherbes, and the shopkeepers close their shops at dusk; in summer the porters' children play about in the roadway, almost causing the passer-by to think that he is in the country.

The suite of rooms aforesaid is on the first floor, having six windows looking on the street, as well as a balcony. The house has an air of respectability. Mrs. Grundy herself would not hesitate to live in it, and a member of the upper *demi-monde* would jump at the chance, by reason of its staid appearance. There are certain lovers who think a good deal of this kind of thing. Some have even been known who made it a stipulation that their paid mistress should attend mass. And, by the bye, the Madeleine is quite close to the Rue de l'Arcade.

There is a light at the windows looking on the balcony, and also one at a window on the second floor; but this latter is hardly perceptible—a feeble glimmer which struggles

through the interstices of the closed curtains—whilst that on the balcony makes no attempt at concealment. It shines boldly through the transparent silk of the Japanese curtains. It might almost be said to invite the passers-by. But the lady of the house is not one of that kind, although she is not of the class of private householders. She could not have claimed even this much during her youth, but she has never regretted amending her ways. She well remembers the day when, six months after leaving a convent, she was led to the altar of the Church of St. Marie des Batignolles by a retired captain, forty years of age, and the possessor of a pension of one thousand nine hundred and fifty francs. At the end of a year the honeymoon went the way of all other moons. The captain had too great a fondness for absinthe. His life was passed at the café, and when he had lost at cards he used to beat his wife. She deserted and joined the regiment of "irregulars."

The exchange turned out to be anything but a bad one, for her advancement was rapid from the very first. She barely went through one campaign in the lower ranks, living in furnished apartments and dunned by her washerwoman for her unpaid bills. At the end of her year of probation she captured a stranger, the providential stranger who purchases the first furniture and has rich friends. After he was gone her fortunes took care of themselves. She took a turn on the stage and had enough sense to remain there no longer than sufficed to attain to a certain rank—that is to say, to that of a brougham, a stepper, coachman, and groom. A short time afterwards she had her landau, her little house in the Rue Jouffroy and her villa at Vésinet. She got her major-generalship, but she was fated never to be marshal. Her good fortune suffered a check, which was quickly followed by a reverse, and that by her own fault. She had a heart, and this heart was not always judiciously bestowed. One cannot be perfect.

At the present moment Claudine Marly is thirty : she confesses to twenty-seven. She no longer keeps her town house ; she does not even keep up an establishment ; but she has not parted with her villa, and is the possessor of an income of seven thousand six hundred francs in the three per cents., in addition to some nice little accumulations besides. Her rooms in the Rue de l'Arcade cost her six thousand francs, and she has just refurnished them. She has settled down. She is still to be seen at "first-nights," and in the society of a few friends of former days who are still in the service ; but she no longer frequents the Bois, and she performs all journeys on foot. Her thoughts are of the future, and she is feathering a nest for her old days.

She has to thank a millionaire for this. She has been with him—such is the technical expression—for the last three years. And this said millionaire is neither old, nor ugly, nor a fool, nor a Brazilian, nor a Wallachian. He is thirty-eight years old and well built ; he has one of those faces which captivate weak women, a Fra Diavolo face, dark, manly, and with a piercing eye ; he is of an open disposition and speaks the language of the boulevards fluently. He made his million on the Bourse, honestly, and stopped at that, not choosing to lose that same million in trying to make another. He is a wise man.

Claudine took his fancy because she too is wise. She costs him fifteen hundred francs per month, not reckoning rent and presents. Claudine is happy. Does she love him ? She has loved him. It was for the reason that she liked him that she left Prince Lounine, a Russian, who inundated her with roubles. Besides this, she had begun to get wearied of foreign notabilities. They are necessary, but in moderation. She was anxious to give France a turn, and Paul Salers was a Parisian, not a countryman transplanted, but a Parisian of Paris, taking in everything, not given to attitud-

inising, neither fussy nor stingy. He has only one failing: he is jealous. But even that he does not carry to excess.

He does not mark the soles of his mistress's boots with chalk, in order to discover whether she has been out during the day. He allows her her full liberty to come and go at her own sweet will. He does not worry her for frequenting the society of certain friends who openly practise polygamy. He does not rummage in drawers to find letters. He does not watch her, and he does not have her watched. Only, from the very first day of their connection, he laid down certain rules. It was agreed that he might come at any hour, without warning, and he gave it to be understood that the acquaintance would terminate at the first violation of the contract. Claudine knows that he would keep his word, and she never dreamt of deceiving him at home. He has got a key.

On this particular evening, which was that of Sunday, Claudine was not expecting him. He went shooting every Sunday, and did not return until the Monday. And yet Claudine had not stirred from home. Caroline Lebarbier, a veteran of high rank, had dined with her, and had left at nine o'clock to go on duty, and Claudine, being left alone with her cup of tea, had rung for her maid to keep her company.

A type was this maid, who answered to the airy name of Olga, although there was nothing of the ethereal about her person; a type of Molière's *soubrette*, modified by frequenting the Bal de la Reine-Blanche. Olga is younger than her mistress, although she looks older. She has been pretty, and would be so still, if she had remained slender; but a life of comfort has fattened her. She has already matronly airs which rather shock Paul Salers, though they are not unpleasing to his friends. She has been four years with

Madame Marly. She entered her service during the reign of the Russian prince, and although she roundly declared that madame was wrong in letting the Boyard go, she threw in her lot with Claudine. She does not repent it, for the situation is a good one. Olga would be rich if she did not love fair men. She is honest, into the bargain. She would not take a louis off the chimney-piece. She only has an understanding with the tradesmen, that is all. She has but one lover, whose name is Ernest, and who spends untold money in dressing himself in the latest Elysée Montmartre fashion. Olga is ruining herself in rose-coloured neckties.

Claudine appreciates the good qualities of her maid, and does not disdain to chat with her, and even to ask her advice on occasion. Olga was not brought up on the lap of a marchioness, but she has always been in service with good families and knows how to keep her place. She proffers her advice to "madame" in the third person. She would never allow herself to be seated in madame's presence, not even were madame alone. So on this Sunday Olga was standing and listening to her mistress who was sitting by the fire, and was answering her gaily but respectfully.

Claudine Marly has a dead white complexion and the jetty hair of a Spaniard, with large blue eyes: a singular fact. And yet she was born in the Rue de Saintonge, in the Marais; but such-like flowers spring up everywhere. Her features are delicate, her face intelligent, her hands superb, her foot marvellous, a foot to turn anyone's head when it is covered by a pearl-grey silk stocking and a black satin slipper, a foot which can be shown naked; which is a rarety. A celebrated sculptor copied it for his statue of Psyche. She is tall, and has halted at the first stage of stoutness, that dangerous enemy of women who have doubled the cape of thirty. She knows how to dress and to walk; she has what Dumas the younger calls *la ligne*. One only needs to

see her stretched on a sofa and clad in her dressing-gown of white cashmere, to perceive that she is made like a model, and that she could pose before an admirer of the antique. Her voice is golden ; when she likes she can say : "My little Paul," in a way that goes straight to the heart.

The two windows of the room where she had taken tea opened on to the balcony. And well did this room look. It was lit up as if for a fête, the furniture was in good taste. The pictures were few but well chosen and there was no profusion of curiosities.

"Madame is bored ; madame should go out, as master is not coming this evening," said Olga.

"Go out!" repeated Claudine, stifling a yawn. "And where should I go? One can't go to the theatre on Sunday. You don't think I should go mooning at the Rink or the Folies-Bergères."

"Madame is wrong not to try, perhaps. It's great fun. Ernest has taken me there."

"Paul would make a nice fuss, if I went in for that kind of thing. He would say that I was lowering myself."

"But I know of a marchioness who does the Folies-Bergères, a real marchioness, the lady on the second floor."

"What! Madame de Benserade?"

"She was there last Sunday, on the arm of a gentleman who was not her husband. She had put on a black veil to hide her face, but I recognised her all the same."

"Do you think she is pretty?"

"Too fair and rather thin, but she has some style."

"The husband does not look up to much. Are they well off?"

"Yes and no. Their money is in land. It's safe, but it doesn't bring in much. They have a château a hundred miles from Paris. The marquis goes there every week to

look after the repairs. And when he's there madame carries on here."

"Are you certain of that?"

"As certain as if I was her maid. I may tell madame that her lover is a very good-looking fellow. He doesn't often come to the house, but when he does come—"

"Hush!" interrupted Claudine. "Do you hear?—that trampling overhead—"

"As plain as if it was here. They have no carpet. There! they've knocked a chair over. It sounds as if they were fighting. A marquis and a marchioness! that would be rather strong."

"They're opening the window upstairs," said Claudine, getting up, so as to hear better. A moment afterwards she cried:

"Gracious! what is that?"

She had heard a strange sound which seemed like the fall of some heavy body which, in falling, had struck violently against the rails of the balcony. The window-panes rattled, so strong was the shock.

Terrified, Claudine neither dared speak nor move. Olga, much less affected, looked towards the window and waited for the order which her mistress was unable to give. Nothing stirred on the balcony, and overhead the sounds had ceased.

"It's some accident, madame, for certain," said Olga. "Somebody has fallen down into the street."

"Into the street!" gasped Claudine; "no, no, it was here, I'm certain. Supposing it was a robber?"

"I don't think so, madame. It's only ten o'clock, and the room is lighted up as if for a ball; robbers go to work when everyone is in bed, never when it's light; and, besides, they don't come down from the roof. I believe it's an accident; some man has committed suicide—a man or a woman."

"A death here! I should rush away and never set foot in the rooms again."

"Madame would be wrong. She would not find anything like it at the price," said Olga, who was of a practical turn. "But that's not the question. We must look what is outside the window. I don't believe there's anything at all—unless—yes, there was some stamping overhead, the window was opened, who knows if the marquis—he has red hair, he must have a hot temper—perhaps he threw the marchioness out."

"She would have called for help."

"Madame is right. Then it was a chair, perhaps; it sounded as if they were throwing them about."

"A chair would have broken in falling. I tell you it was a man. And Paul not here!"

"Madame has no need of master. I would defend madame if anyone tried to hurt her."

"Just consider that we are all alone here; if Caroline Lebarbier had only stopped. They might kill us two before we had time to cry out. The papers are full of murders."

"Oh! they wouldn't kill one like that, and I wouldn't let them kill madame. But madame is wrong. There's no one there; there's nothing to be heard."

"The man's hiding; he is waiting for the lights to be put out."

"Well, he won't hide five minutes longer, for I'm going to see what he's like."

Saying this, Olga walked to the window and opened it cautiously. Claudine, who had vainly attempted to prevent her, saw her stoop down, then start up quickly and re-enter the room.

"Madame was right," she said in a whisper. "There is a man, but he isn't a robber, he's dressed like a prince, and

he isn't dangerous, for he's unconscious. Madame has only got to look at him to see that."

Madame had no such desire, but the maid took a candle from the chimney-piece, and madame made up her mind to follow her to the balcony on which the body was lying. Olga placed the light near the stranger's face and cried:

"It's the Folies-Bergères young man."

"What do you mean, the Folies-Bergères?" repeated Claudine, who did not understand.

"The one I've seen there with the Marchioness de Benserade. No occasion now to wonder where he's come from. I know."

"Yes, he must have been surprised by the husband, and good heavens! is he dead?"

"That would be a pity," muttered the maid, "he's as handsome as a cupid."

"No," she continued, placing her hand on his breast; "his heart's beating, he lives, and I don't believe any bones are broken; there's no blood about; he had sense enough to fall on his feet, and the shock has stunned him. Madame is of my opinion, no doubt, that we can't leave him here."

"No, certainly not. He would die."

"And if the marquis were to look out of the window, he would know what sort of opinion to have about his wife's virtue."

"He might pursue him here to kill him. Quick, Olga, help me to carry him into the room."

"Oh, madame need not trouble; I can manage well enough without help. He can't weigh more than a feather."

Olga set about her task of lifting him, and she was quite strong enough to do it. She had already placed her candle on the ground and was stooping down to grasp the interesting stranger.

"Ah!" said she, "he's opening his eyes."

It was true. He opened his eyes, large blue eyes whose first look was for Claudine. But this was not all. He raised himself on one arm, and with no further trouble or ceremony extended his other hand to the sturdy maid, who raised him without an effort. She was about to support him by the waist, but he chose to lean on her shoulder and actually had the hardihood to smile on the mistress.

This visitor from the clouds was a charming young fellow; tall, but not unduly so, slender, muscular and well-knit. His face was that of one of Louis XIII.'s musketeers. Hair rather long, and fine enough to make ladies wish to toy with it; high forehead, a proudly aquiline nose, haughty mouth, with sensual lips, teeth like a wolf's, and a lovely, fair, silky moustache, whose touch must have been like a caress.

Having led him to an easy-chair by the fireside, the adroit Olga ran and picked up the hat which had been left on the balcony, and shut the window, as she had opened it, very quietly. Claudine had not taken her eyes off the young man, who was not wholly a stranger to her, for she remembered having seen him in the Bois and at the theatres. She recollected even having inquired his name of a friend, who had not been able to tell her what it was. This was plain proof that this handsome fellow did not make it his speciality to do the agreeable to the fair frequenters of the Bois. He was no doubt estimated at his full value amongst the ladies of the upper ten, who at any rate are as good judges as any others.

"Do you feel better?" she asked.

"Much better, thanks to you," murmured the invalid. "If you had left me on the balcony, the cold would have laid hold on me and I should never have awoke from my swoon. I should have been found dead to-morrow morning,

and goodness knows what people would have said. But I must have frightened you dreadfully."

"Yes, we heard the sound of your fall, and did not know what to think. I thought at first it was a robber."

"I hope you feel reassured now, madame, and it is only left for me to make my excuses for having entered your room—like wine enters bottles—from the top. Do you know why?"

"I don't want to know," replied Claudine, smiling.

"I was truly told that you were the most intelligent of women—and the best."

"People have talked to you about me! Why, who?"

"All who know you. Monsieur Paul Salers belongs to my club, and we have mutual friends."

"But you are not intimate with him?" asked Madame Marly, quickly.

"No, madame. He knows my name, and that is all. I should have told you that my name is George de Gravigny."

"The son of the old Count de Gravigny who used to be on the turf and has such beautiful horses?"

"No, madame. The count has no children. I am his nephew."

Olga had not lost a word of this dialogue, and said to herself, looking at George from the corners of her eyes:

"His lot is not to be despised. His uncle is worth three hundred thousand francs a year. If this youth comes in for all that—but no—it wouldn't be right. When a man has a face like that, he has no need to be rich."

"But I'm all right now," continued Monsieur de Gravigny. "I must go."

"Nothing forces you to," murmured Claudine.

"Yes, if only from fear of compromising you. If Monsieur Salers were to arrive, he would no doubt be disagreeably surprised to find me here."

"Monsieur Salers is away shooting, and I don't expect him till to-morrow. But if by any chance he came this evening, I could explain what had happened. He is a good sort of fellow, and you could rely on him."

"I'm sure of that; but I should prefer not to test it. And I should be even much obliged if you would not let him into a secret—which is not exactly my own."

"You are quite right to trust to no one but women," said Olga hardily.

"Well said, my girl," said George de Gravigny, laughing. "I would trust them to any extent. But I have another reason for wishing to leave the house as soon as possible. The way that I took was the only one open; needless to explain the situation to you."

"I see it all. The marquis came in at the door as you left by the window."

"And naturally I couldn't shut it after me. If he notices that it is open—"

"Is it the bed-room window?" asked the sly Olga.

"No. It is that of the little room exactly over here. I had just arrived."

"That's a good job for everyone. You have left nothing there—not even your hat. The husband will never suspect that you have been there. Lovers who risk a broken neck to get a woman out of a scrape, are rare."

"Still more rare are women who don't lose their head in such a case, and I'm not at all comfortable."

"They must be getting on all right. There's no noise to be heard."

"On the contrary, it seems to me as if—"

"Yes, there are steps, it sounds like a man walking towards the window."

"Exactly so. I haven't a moment to lose," said George, rising. "If he thinks that I have fallen on to your

balcony, he is quite capable of coming and hunting me up here."

"Then go, go quickly," said Claudine anxiously. "If the man comes here, I will undertake to receive him."

"You are an angel," said George, covering with kisses a hand which the lady freely abandoned. "We shall meet again, I hope."

"Not here," replied Madame Marly quickly.

"No, no, that wouldn't be safe, but we can see one another elsewhere. I have it on my heart to thank you, and if you will—"

"Listen!" interrupted Olga; "the window overhead has just been banged to."

"The deuce! can he have suspected?"

"Someone is running to the door—they're opening it; if I were you, sir, I should wait a moment before venturing out on the staircase."

The maid had hardly done speaking when the electric bell in the room rung three times, one after the other.

"It's he," cried Claudine and George in one breath.

"Unless it is master," said Olga in a whisper.

"He wouldn't ring; he has a key," replied Madame Marly.

"I didn't think of that. But this is no time for losing one's head."

The bell rung afresh, this time a violent peal.

"What shall we do?" whispered Claudine.

"Open the door, my dear madame," said Monsieur de Gravigny calmly. "This madman would wind up by kicking the door in. I won't expose you to a scandal of that description. Let me have an explanation with the marquis. Whatever comes of it, you won't be compromised."

"I won't let you expose yourself. He is armed, perhaps."

"I'll disarm him. I've done it to many another man."

"What folly!" said Olga sharply. "Go into madame's bedroom and lock the door. This marquis won't eat us, and if he gets too unruly, we can call you."

"There will be no need to do that. I shall listen, and if he talks too loudly, I'll come in. After all, he has never seen me, and it isn't written on my face that his wife—"

"Go along quickly, sir," said Olga, pushing him, "and take your overcoat off. It's all wet. If you are obliged to show yourself, it won't do for him to see that you have lain on the wet balcony."

"*You're* no fool," said George, taking the hint.

"Now, madame, I'll open the door. And it's time, too. He'll pull the bell down."

"You won't let him come in, I hope?"

"Madame need not be uneasy. I know all about jealous men, and I can quiet them down. Only, I can't answer for it that he'll listen to me at first. He'll ask to look, perhaps. In that case madame will have to help me."

"Oh! my goodness! he's knocking now."

"I'm going," said Olga, rushing out of the room.

Claudine was dreadfully upset. She was even terribly frightened, though not for herself. This husband would not take vengeance on a neighbour for his wife's unfaithfulness. She was alarmed for George de Gravigny, this handsome fellow who had fallen from the clouds, like some hero of romance. Women are always on the side of lovers.

"If this madman were to kill him," she thought, shuddering, and she strained her ears.

The outer door was only separated from the drawing-room by a large ante-room. Claudine heard at first the clear voice of Olga, soon drowned by the accents of a deeper one, then a sound of trampling feet, followed by exclamations which increased in vehemence and volume; and almost immediately

the door was thrown open by a gentleman who was closely followed by Olga.

He was a man who must have been close upon fifty, although his hair and beard were still of a bright blond; tall, bony and muscular; the appearance of a sporting gentleman, with a complexion tanned by exposure to the country air. He was dressed with no attempt at elegance, but no one could have mistaken him for a shopkeeper in his best clothes. And, as Olga in her domestic's language remarked, he looked an awkward customer.

On this occasion he looked more awkward than usual. His face was flushed and his eyes darted fire. He entered the room, his hat on his head, and his fists clenched—two signs of a violent scene—and walked straight to Madame Marly, who stood and waited for him in the middle of the room with a dignified air. On seeing her he recollected that he was a marquis and was about to speak to a woman. He took off his hat. But he could not make up his mind to bow to her, nor to call her madame.

"There is a man here," he said, in a voice choking with anger. "Where is he?"

"Who are you, sir? And by what right do you enter my rooms?" asked Claudine coldly.

She felt now that she had an opportunity of playing a good part, and her self-possession had returned.

"Who am I? You know that well enough, since you live in the same house as I do. I am the Marquis de Benserade. And you know well, too, why I have forced my way in. A man came down upon your balcony from a window above. That man was in my rooms."

"And he escaped when you came in," cried the artful Olga. "Ah, sir, why ever didn't you say that at first? I shouldn't have made any fuss about letting you pass. A man who jumps out of a window can only be a thief. And

you think he's on the balcony! Good gracious! I'll go down and send the doorkeeper for a couple of policemen."

"Be quiet!" said the marquis roughly, "and don't move, I command you."

"What! You would have us let a scoundrel stop there who might murder madame in the night?"

"I want you to open that window."

"I'm not so silly. I've no wish to get a knock on the head. Open it yourself, if you feel so inclined."

And as Monsieur Benserade walked towards it, Olga added in a whisper, but yet loud enough to be overheard:

"Perhaps there's no one, after all. If any one had fallen from the second floor, it would have made a noise. Madame would have noticed it."

The marquis opened the window and looked out.

"There! What did I tell you?" continued Olga. "The place is empty. I knew well enough that our balcony was no robber's perch. It was your imagination, but it was hardly reasonable. You'd have to be a clown from the circus to go down one storey without touching the stairs." And as the marquis was silent:

"Perhaps he was dashed on the pavement," she continued, making as if to walk out on the balcony. "No? You don't want me to look? You're quite right; it isn't worth while. If there was a dead man there would be a crowd by now, and shouts enough to rouse the whole neighbourhood."

Monsieur de Benserade motioned her away by a gesture and returned to Claudine, who was admiring the inventive faculty of her maid, and feeling in a mood to hold her own with this jealous husband.

"If the man is no longer there, it is because you have hidden him," he said in a firm voice.

"There!" cried the maid, "fancy taking madame for the accomplice of your thief. Why, my dear sir, if a thief

had landed here, he wouldn't have stopped. He would have bolted as soon as possible."

"Silence!" said Madame Marly.

She judged that it was time to interfere, for the situation was at once dangerous and ridiculous.

"I am astonished, sir," she continued, addressing the husband, "that a man of your birth and education should prolong a scene of this description. You are in my rooms, against my will—though that might possibly admit of an explanation. You are under the influence of excitement and were pursuing a criminal. But now you are aware that he is not on this balcony, and you cannot suppose that I am his accomplice. Therefore, I must request you to retire."

"I will not go before making certain that you and your maid are alone here," replied Monsieur de Beuserade coolly, fixing his eyes on the door through which George de Gravigny had made his exit.

"Really, this is too much. So it is your intention, perchance, to search my bedroom?"

At this moment Madame Marly noticed that Olga was making signs to her, and she soon saw the meaning of the pantomime. The usually artful maid had been guilty of a great piece of carelessness. On fetching the hat that had fallen on the balcony, she had placed it on a table and there left it; now, this wretched table stood between the fireplace and the door, which the marquis was persistently eyeing. It was a miracle that he had not already noticed it, and the maid at once conceived the audacious plan of removing this damaging piece of evidence—the more damaging that it was wet. The task was not an easy one. It was a case of passing between the table and a lynx-eyed husband. Olga attempted it, however, and began to manœuvre accordingly, when Monsieur de Beuserade turned round.

"You persist in saying that no one has been here?" he asked.

"I repeat, sir, that I am alone. No one has been here this evening, with the exception of a friend who left an hour ago."

"Was it she who left that hat?"

Claudine's face fell, but Olga came to the rescue.

"Well!" she cried, placing her arms akimbo, "has madame got no right to have a lover?"

"Then it is your lover who is there," resumed the terrible marquis. "Why is he hiding himself? I know him by sight. In fact I know his name. If this hat is his, his initials will be inside it."

He had hold of it already, and soon got the required information.

"Two G's, surmounted by a viscount's coronet," said he with threatening sarcasm. "I was not aware that Monsieur Salers was titled."

"Sir," stammered Claudine, "this inquisition is intolerable."

"Enough! Open that door, or I'll burst it open."

"Burst madame's bedroom door!" said Olga, barring the way to the marquis. "I should like to see you do it. I shouldn't hesitate long about screaming: 'Fire!' and 'Police!'"

She had hit the mark, without suspecting it. However furious Monsieur de Benserade might be, he saw the danger of an uproar which might alarm the passers-by. He was anxious to avenge his honour, but he by no means wished to make his misfortunes public. He was the less inclined to do this, since in reality he had only suspicions—grave suspicions—but still no absolute certainty. Having returned unexpectedly from his country seat, he had found his wife alone, but so uneasy, so upset, that he had set about searching the rooms. The incident of the open window

above the balcony, which was only ten feet below ; a scream uttered by the marchioness when he looked out : it needed no more to cause his intrusion into Madame Marly's apartments. He was just the man to kill the lover, even if he did not catch him red-handed, by blowing his brains out with a revolver which he carried in his pocket. Only he did not wish to kill him without making sure of his guilt.

"Very good !" he cried, throwing the fatal hat aside, "I will not burst this door in, I will not even attempt to open it, for I suppose it is locked inside. The man who is there can hear me, I am certain, and I call on him to show himself."

"But haven't we told you that there's no one there ?" sneered Olga.

"You may call ; it will be like whistling to the wind."

"If he persists in concealing himself," retorted the unreasonable marquis, raising his voice, "he is a coward."

At this defiance was heard the sound as of a chair being violently pushed aside. Madame Marly grew pale. She knew that George, who was listening to the husband's tirades, had jumped up, stung to the quick by the last remark. It was one of those that are not easy to swallow, supposing a man has any blood in his veins.

Olga, too, had understood, and said to herself :

"That lunatic is coming out to stand up to the marquis. Gracious ! what fools men are ! They can't swallow an ugly word without making a face."

"Yes," vociferated Monsieur de Benserade, who had heard the chair move, "a coward, a scamp, whom I'd thrash if he was here."

The measure was full. The bolt was drawn, the door opened, and George de Gravigny appeared, his arms folded, his head erect, his moustache bristling.

"The rogue! doesn't he look handsome like that!" thought Olga. "A woman would throw herself in the water for him, upon my word. Let's hope he won't 'fetch' madame."

Claudine, much moved, devoured him with her eyes.

"Was it you, sir, who were talking of thrashing me?" he said coolly. "Try it!"

The marquis looked at him like a wild boar looks at the hunter before charging him, but he appeared a little surprised. Evidently he did not know him, and he was astonished at never having seen him. Perhaps he suspected his wife of having an intrigue with one of his friends. Such a thing is not uncommon. But the offence was none the less that it was committed by a stranger, and the marquis was furious.

"I do not wish to chastise you here," replied Monsieur de Benserade.

"Chastise me for what?" asked George, in his most insolent tone.

"You know well enough."

"I! not in the least. I know that you came in here, without this lady's permission, and that you have since been shouting out as if you were in some common woman's house. I left this room because madame begged me to do so. She thought that her maid would be sufficient to show you the door, if you did not conduct yourself properly. But it is time, I think, that I interfered."

"No more lies, sir! In the first place, your name?"

"When you have told me yours, I will think about giving it."

"I am the Marquis de Benserade."

"And I, I am the Viscount de Gravigny."

"Then I can fight you."

"Yes, when you have told me why."

"You refuse, then?"

"A duel with a madman. Oh, most decidedly."

"Then I'll shoot you," said the husband, taking from his pocket a large-bore revolver, a regular weapon of war.

Claudine nearly fainted, and Olga herself went white. Although a good hand at meeting unforeseen difficulties, she was not accustomed to violent scenes. The class of people amongst whom her life had been spent rarely have recourse to the pistol.

George alone retained his self-possession, although he saw plainly that the danger was great. He knew the marquis by heart. The marchioness had given him a good idea of his character.

"You are going to shoot me," he said, coolly, and without budging an inch. "By what right?"

"By that right which every man has of avenging the honour of his name. You were in my rooms just now—with my wife. If I had found you there, I should have killed you like a dog. You fled like a coward, but you won't escape me. You owe me satisfaction, and I am willing to offer it you once more. If you refuse to give it, I swear that you shall not leave this place alive."

"A likely tale," said Olga, who had found her tongue again. "Why, my dear sir, you've lost your senses. This gentleman hasn't been in your rooms. Do you fancy that madame would put up with what some one else has left?"

"That is to say that she is Monsieur de Gravigny's mistress. I don't intend to be put off with that lie. I know Monsieur Paul Salers."

"What has that to do with it?"

"Enough of this. I spoke to you, sir, and you alone. I await your reply."

"What the deuce do you want me to reply to?" said

George carelessly. "You ask for satisfaction for an injury. I maintain that I have not injured you. And I hold that I am not bound to explain to you what my business here is. You are welcome to think, if you choose, that Madame Marly invited me here to tea. As for your threat of blowing my brains out, that's a matter of indifference to me. You will allow me to go so far as to say that it is somewhat ridiculous."

"Wretch!" cried Monsieur de Benserade; "after having dishonoured me, you insult me. It is too much. You shall die."

And he levelled his revolver.

Claudine listened, shuddering. When she saw the barrel pointing at the breast of the handsomest of viscounts, she bounded forward like a lioness and threw herself in front of George, who had neither moved nor blanched. He was curling his fair moustache with an aristocratic hand.

"He is my lover. You shall not touch him," she said, glaring at the marquis.

"Your lover's name is Paul Salers," replied Monsieur de Benserade coldly.

"Paul Salers keeps me. *This* is my lover."

And as the marquis hesitated, confused by this unexpected avowal, Claudine threw herself on George de Gravigny, took his head between her hands and kissed him rapturously, three, six, ten times.

"Do you doubt it now?" she said, turning to the astounded marquis. "Do you think that I would allow him to be your wife's lover?"

The situation was a dramatic one: Monsieur de Benserade irritated, disconcerted, suspicious; Claudine elated; George disdainful and mocking; Olga vexed and muttering:

"Just what I expected!"

"Is this true, sir?" asked the marquis in a choking voice

"It must be true, since this lady has stated it," retorted George, smiling at Madame Marly.

"And you were silent! you allowed me to accuse you, to threaten you!"

"I would have died rather than betray a woman's secret to you."

The answer had a double meaning, and Monsieur de Benserade felt it; but to prevent any evil consequences Claudine intervened afresh, and this time with address.

"How was it that you did not see how things stood?" she cried. "You can't know life; you must be a savage. What! you know my lover to be titled; you find another man here, who consents to give his name, but who has the delicacy to refuse to say on what footing I receive him, and by your outrageous behaviour and threats you force me to proclaim that I love Monsieur de Gravigny, and that I am obliged to conceal that love. Really, sir, such conduct is unpardonable, when one belongs to your rank of life. Are you going to force me to go into details? must I tell you that Monsieur Salers goes shooting every Sunday, and that I profit by his absence to pass an evening with George? Do you want me to tell you the exact time at which he arrived? Shall I explain to you that if he shut himself up in my bedroom when you rang, it was because I was afraid that it was some friend of Monsieur Salers?"

"No," muttered Monsieur de Benserade, whose convictions were rudely shaken.

"It only remains for you to tell Monsieur Salers that madame has a lover," cried the rash Olga at the top of her voice.

This unfortunate remark was uttered just at the very moment when Paul Salers in person opened the door.

It was a tableau, but a tableau without noise, without screams, without by-play. It was in fact a mute scene, for

everyone was silent. It was with difficulty that Olga managed to say between her teeth :

"This is what comes of giving a man a key."

Of all the actors in this drama, Paul Salers should have been the most agitated. The gathering that he found at his mistress's was calculated to astonish, by no means to please him. And yet he was the most collected. He quietly shut the door, took off his hat, and went and put his gun and game-bag down in a corner.

The marquis had recognised him at once, and George, who met him oftener, sooner still. But the marquis was delighted at his appearance, and George was by no means so. The marquis saw that an explanation would ensue, and remove his last doubts. It mattered little to him what this explanation cost Madame Marly.

George saw that a heavy responsibility would fall on him, whatever happened. If Claudine told the truth to save herself and keep Monsieur Salers, Monsieur de Benserade would wreak vengeance on the lover of his wife, who would also be ruined. If, on the contrary, Claudine carried her heroism to the point of lying, she would sacrifice a good position for the sake of a youth who had very little to offer her, and who did not even own her for his mistress.

Olga calculated mournfully that it was all over with the good days of Paul Salers' protection. She had had an opportunity of studying his character, and she said to herself :

"He's as supple as a bar of steel. There's no getting out of it for madame. I have known men that she could have led by the nose. But it's no go with him. He's one of those who don't get over a thing like this. He won't even let her explain to him privately. Madame will be left to her own resources to-morrow. Well, she'll regret him. The fair one is handsome, but what's the good of

being the nephew of a count with three hundred thousand a-year? he has none of it to give away."

Claudine, although she had seen a good deal of life, had never found herself in such a fix. It was not the first time that she had been surprised. But for these catastrophes, which a lady of her mode of life should always be prepared for, there had always been at least one compensation: a new love, or a caprice satisfied. And, besides, in those days she troubled herself little enough about one stage more or less in the joyous life she led, and change of barracks troubled her little. Now she had to think of the future. Paul Salers was not one of those variable friends that one replaces easily; and, looking at it from a serious point of view, she had her doubts about the charming viscount. After all, he was not her lover. Did she know even whether he was inclined to be so? What folly to compromise her future to get him out of a scrape! She could satisfy Paul with one word, although it was somewhat late in the day now to speak that word which would explain all.

Yes, but over their heads was a woman who was weeping, who was trembling, who was awaiting in horrible agony the return of her offended husband. Claudine had no reason to love the marchioness. In the first place, she was what people call a virtuous woman, and a virtuous woman she was not, for she had a lover. A rival, consequently; a dangerous and scornful rival, who turned away her head when she met her first-floor neighbour on the stairs, and who clung to the wall, for fear lest her dress should touch the skirts of an impure woman. What an opportunity for revenge! And yet Claudine hesitated. This husband appeared to her to be capable of going to terrible extremes. A man who would have killed the lover without an explanation would be liable to kill the wife after having had one. And death would be too severe a punishment.

There was no escape from the terrible alternative: to lose her own position or condemn Madame Benserade.

All these reflections were made in a few seconds, and then an idea struck her. She believed she had found a compromise between her own interests and the pity with which the marchioness inspired her, an arrangement which might smooth all difficulties. She thought that it would suffice to detain Paul after the marquis had gone away soothed by a public avowal, and to tell him privately the whole truth, calling Monsieur de Gravigny to witness. Paul was Parisian enough to understand the ins and outs of this comedy and to forgive his mistress for having taken part in it.

Perhaps, too, Claudine thought to herself that, the danger once removed, this handsome man, by name George, would fit in well with the life she had planned for herself; that he would become friendly with Paul, and that she would be able, without giving up Monsieur Salers, to make George "the happiest of the three."

The hearts of "irregulars" are full of deceit.

Before all it was important to know what this same Paul Salers, who put such a good face on an ugly matter, would say. He walked coolly up to the group of three who stood in front of the fireplace, and he had somehow managed to put on the air of a good citizen returning home from the country and delighted to find two friends keeping his wife company. He might have represented Othello, being just about of the right physique, and he took on himself without an effort the part of George Dandin.

First of all he held out his hand to Claudine, and said gaily:

"I am disturbing you, my dear. Excuse me. If I had foreseen that the rain would force me to return to Paris this evening, with three rabbits as the total of my bag, I

would have sent you a telegram. Husbands who absent themselves should always take a barometer, and above all never arrive when they are not expected."

This opening augured ill for Madame Marly. She had much experience of Paul Salers, and she was mistrustful of his cool irony.

"But introduce me to these gentlemen," he continued. "I have the honour of knowing them by sight. But perhaps they do not know me."

"I know you very well, sir," said Monsieur de Benserade abruptly, "and I don't think it is necessary for me to mention my name."

"Certainly not, marquis."

"We have often met at a club," said George in his turn.

"Very often, sir, but this is the first time that we have spoken, and it is possible that it may be the last. Be good enough to tell me to what fact I owe the pleasure of seeing you here."

"It is for me to tell you that," said the pitiless marquis. "I came in here because I felt certain of finding a man who had intruded in my house. This man fled on my arrival, and I had grave reasons for thinking that he had taken refuge here. I discovered Monsieur de Gravigny, and when I demanded the satisfaction which he owed me, this lady declared to me that I was mistaken, that Monsieur de Gravigny had passed the evening with her, and that he was—"

"Her lover," interrupted Monsieur Salers coolly. "I heard as much, on opening the door. Poor Olga has such a clear voice that it carries as far as the ante-room."

"I had some difficulty in believing it," continued Monsieur de Benserade, "and I shall not believe it until madame repeats it before you."

Claudine was about to speak, but the words died away in her throat, and George spoke for her.

"Sir," said he to the marquis, "your conduct is disgraceful, and I refuse no longer to fight with you. It can take place when you please, unless," he added, turning to Paul Salers, "unless this gentleman claims priority."

"I, sir," said the latter seriously, "I swear that I have not the least wish to do so. I have nothing against you; I even look upon myself as under an obligation to you."

Claudine trembled and cast a meaning glance on Paul Salers, who did not appear to understand.

"Well, madame?" said Monsieur de Benserade. "I am waiting. Are you or are you not Monsieur George de Gravigny's mistress?"

"I will be less cowardly than you, who abuse the fearful position in which you have placed a woman," said Claudine at last. "Cost what it may to confess it—yes, Monsieur de Gravigny is my lover."

Her lips said: Yes; her eyes, fixed on Paul Salers, said: No: and Olga, who had retreated into a corner behind the marquis, made violent signs to the contrary to Paul Salers.

These mute denials of a dangerous avowal produced no effect. But the husband appeared to be satisfied.

"That is sufficient for me," he said, bowing.

"For me also," added Monsieur Salers. "Shall we go out together, marquis?"

"Paul!" cried Claudine, taking a step towards him.

"Excuse me, my dear madame," replied Paul, as cold as the North Pole, "my friends are expecting me at the *Café Anglais*, and I have hardly time to dress. It was very wrong of me to disturb you this evening. It shall not happen again, but I beg you to remember that I shall always retain a pleasing recollection of you."

Uttering this mocking farewell, he took up his gun and

game-bag. "My warmest congratulations, sir," said he to George, who was looking sufficiently foolish.

And off he went, humming a tune. The marquis was already on the stairs.

"Oh, what brutes men are!" sighed Olga, raising her arms to heaven.

Claudine Marly was beside herself. She rushed to George and said to him in her silvery voice:

"It was not to save the marchioness that I told the lie. It was because I don't want you to see her again. It was because I love you!"

II

Every night has an end, and it is rare that the morrow is gay when the day before has been disturbed. Morning is the time for reflection. Things have another aspect and the thoughts condense. Stendhal, the illustrious author of *Rouge et Noir*, called this phenomenon crystallisation. He applied the word to love, the most active of all feelings. It can be applied also to many others.

George de Gravigny, crossing the Place de l'Opéra about mid-day, did not look in the least like a man who is wrestling with his conscience. He left his chambers in the Rue Neuve-des-Mathurins, where he had gone to dress, and proceeded, with his hat on one side and his cane in his hand, to breakfast at a restaurant.

The grisettes, trotting along to the dairy, gave him sly looks as he passed, and busy foot-passengers, taking him for one of the lucky ones of this world, envied his easy swagger. George was one of those privileged persons who always look as if they had a hundred pounds in their pocket, even when it is empty. And no one would have imagined that this careless fellow could have that day a heavy trouble on his mind. And yet so it was; and as he strolled along, his nose in the air, he reflected on his awkward position.

George, the only son of an extravagant father, who had left him nothing but debts, had spent, nearly seven years before, the small fortune which he had inherited from his mother. It was not wholly his fault that he had run

through it so quickly. George possessed an uncle, and, on his entry into life, this uncle, who had no children, had offered to launch him in the aristocratic society in which he himself, as a nobleman of ancient lineage, the owner of a fine estate in Normandy, and the promoter and president of one of the most exclusive clubs in Paris, held a high rank.

Count Roger de Gravigny belonged to the generation of fast livers which flourished in the reign of Louis-Philippe. He had a racing stable at the time when Lord Seymour's horses defeated all rivals in the hippodrome of the Champ de Mars. In former days he had won at the Café de Paris—the old, the true one, the one which disappeared five-and-twenty years ago—a celebrated wager: five hundred francs to be eaten and drunk by him in one dinner ordered from the *carte*. It would be less difficult now-a-days. The ladies of the Old Guard, those whose youth is lost in the night of time, still remembered the suppers which he used to give them.

His brother, who used to take a part in these orgies, had died, ruined, and somewhat out of odour. But his brother had married badly. He had followed his own tastes and chosen a well educated girl, who had brought him a hundred thousand francs, settled upon herself, luckily for George, who had had the pleasure of squandering them to the four winds of heaven after his mother's death.

In the meantime Count Roger had succeeded in repairing the breaches made in his patrimony. Marriage had set him on his feet again; a marriage with the wealthy orphan of a member of the old Parisian *bourgeoisie*. After this he had settled down. Of the Roger of old days there remained only a serious and orderly gentleman, regretful of his past errors, a model farmer, only living in Paris three months out of the year and, when there, only enjoying a legitimate amusement. He had retained, moreover, a measure of philosophic indul-

gence, and had not been too severe on the escapades of his nephew, whom he had always treated as his presumptive heir.

He liked George, because George had some breed in him; that was his word. So far as appearance went, George was a charming fellow; he had plenty of sense, of that kind of sense which ensures worldly success, and of pluck enough and to spare. Surpassingly impudent, and brave to excess, Count Roger felt himself live again in him, and predicted for him a career similar to his own: ten years of dissipation closed by a good match. The uncle resigned himself to stand the expenses incident on the first stage, and took upon himself to find the match when the proper time came.

Unfortunately he had reckoned without taking into consideration the nature of George, who was somewhat of an exception. George knew no restraint, George never halted in his furious career, and threw himself headlong into every excess. His matches always ended in disaster, and his connections in scandal. And moreover, he was not fond of good company. He only felt at home with the outcasts of both sexes. For a long time his duels had kept him in the count's good graces, who had formerly been a fire-eater himself, and who felt delighted every time that he was told of some brilliant thrust given or received by his nephew. The good Count Roger had tried every diversion to cure him, and, amongst others, travelling; a mission to China, a stay at Vienna as unsalaried attaché to the French Embassy. George had come home in debt to every banker in Shanghai, and his diplomatic campaign in Austria had terminated in his elopement with an Hungarian baroness, whom he had abandoned at an hotel in the Tyrol, after having treated her husband to a thrust in the lungs.

Finally, the uncle had enough of it. He had been forced to the conclusion that George was incorrigible, and that all

attempts to reclaim him were vain. George was twenty-nine, an age when reform is out of the question, and George was fast hastening on his downward career. Count Roger had been forced to give him up, after a violent scene in which George had shown himself intractable. The count had forbidden him his door, and George was too proud to attempt to return after he had been once expelled.

A year had passed, during which the count and his nephew had not spoken, when an interrupted day's shooting brought about an incident which was destined to leave its mark on that nephew's existence.

During that year, George, left to himself, had lived from hand to mouth, counting on chance, or luck at baccarat, or operations on the Bourse, which were conducted by a confidential hanger-on, by means of what credit he had left; on the various ideas which occur to the outcasts of society who tramp the pavement of Paris; on old friendships, which threatened to fade away by reason of too frequent appeals for funds, but which were not finally broken off.

He bore his uncertain lot cheerfully, and did not in the least despair of the future. It must be owned that he had not yet arrived at those extremities which are, as it were, the death agony of a prodigal. He had kept up the appearance of good fortune, and certain of its privileges. His effects were seized, but his rent was paid, so that he was still free to live where he chose. His tailors clothed him without a murmur, well knowing that he set off his clothes as no one else could, and that he would not refuse to do them a good turn by recommending them to his rich friends. Pocket money had never failed him; pocket money, that indispensable viaticum through lack of which the chance of making a fortune is sometimes lost. Paris is a fruitful field for those who have sown it, in ruining themselves headlong, and who know how to cultivate it; but in order to cultivate it, a man must have means to buy his dinner.

Finally—the last advantage, which was equivalent to all the others put together—his friends born in the same rank of life still recognised him. It is true they avoided him. But they feared him too much to give him the cut direct.

This morning, therefore, although in a bad fix, George put a good face on things. He was standing on a refuge in the middle of the Place de l'Opéra and was debating whether he should go into Tortoni's or into a *café* in the Place de la Madeleine, where he usually breakfasted. The morning was fine, the pavement dry. It was one of those beautiful winter mornings when ladies go out on foot. Adventures were in the air.

George, who was still trying to make up his mind, saw approaching from the corner of the Avenue de l'Opéra, a tall young man, from whom he had been seldom apart since the time when he had begun to be indifferent about the company he kept. An acquaintance made in some third-rate club. The neighbourhood of the green cloth and the society of the *demi-monde* cement friendship as nothing else can. It is the freemasonry of vice.

Fernand Daubrac had not been reared in a duchess's lap, although he would fain set up as an aristocrat, and no one knew precisely how his youth had been spent, but he cut a good figure everywhere and stinted himself for nothing. He might be seen in the Bois, mounted on a thoroughbred, and he never missed a first night. For organising a supper, he had no equal. Pleasure-loving foreigners ran after him, the "irregulars" appreciated him, he was to be met occasionally in staid society, and it was said that he was in the confidence of a great financier whose wife was well disposed towards him.

He was a handsome fellow, pleasant, and even distinguished looking, although he was a trifle too much like a retired non-commissioned cavalry officer. As soon as he saw George

he waved his stick cheerily, and began to thread his way through the maze of vehicles which covered the Place. George, who was not sorry to meet him, for he was well able to give him advice, stood and waited for him.

"Out by twelve o'clock," cried Fernand; "you were not playing cards last night, then?"

"No," said George, "for reasons you may guess—and for others which I'll tell you presently."

"Oh, you've no money"

"I have seven louis in my pocket and nothing in my desk."

"Would you like to have four or five thousand francs in an hour's time?"

"Rather! Are you thinking of lending me them?"

"No. I haven't got them. But I have an idea."

"An idea worth five thousand francs!" said George. "The deuce! that's rare."

"Five thousand is putting it rather high, perhaps," replied Daubrac. "Let's say four. Just what you owe me for the other night."

"Then your idea would result in the payment of a doubtful debt. I understand why you think it such a good one."

"Who do you take me for? I ask for nothing. You can pay me when you win something. And it's not impossible that that should be to-night. They're talking at the club of a Russian who keeps open bank. With two hundred louis to start with we might make it hot for him. That's my idea. And you shall stand in half."

"Good!"

"I thought you would like it. How are you with your uncle now?"

"Bad, as you know well. He cut off all supplies a year ago, closed his door to me, and forbade me to speak when I meet him. He even told me not to appear to know him. Pretty complete, isn't it?"

"Then you don't take any notice of him when you meet him?"

"I never do meet him. He spends his life on his estate in the department of L'Orne. He must be piling up money. His income is three hundred thousand francs, and he doesn't spend sixty."

"Yes, he's gone in for being a hermit in his old days, after having gone the pace when he was young. That will never be the case with you."

"No fear. I shall perform the first part of the programme; but I sha'n't live to be an old man."

"How do you know that? But this is not the time for discussing theories. I give you due notice that your uncle is here."

"What is that to me? He only comes to Paris to jaw with agricultural authorities—or to please his wife, whom I suspect still of having worldly aspirations. If you are reckoning on him letting me have two hundred louis—"

"Exactly so, my dear fellow. You will have them in two hours, if you will follow implicitly my instructions."

"You are mad."

"Not at all. Nothing is easier. It's only a question of doing certain things."

"That is to say, of going to see him, and of being wearied with platitudes? Never! In the first place, it would not succeed; you don't know my uncle. If he bore with me for five or six years, it was because I stood up to him, because I was always ready to meet the first man that came along, because I treated the women cavalierly and paid the husbands in sword-thrusts when they complained. He likes that kind of thing. The man is three hundred years behind his time. He is a *raffiné* of the sixteenth century."

"I know that, and I am making allowance for it."

"Oh, that will do. But, out with it. I don't care for charades. What do you want me to do?"

"If I told you plainly you would spoil all, for you would play your part badly."

"My part! Then there's a comedy to be played! That won't suit me."

"You're not in it. Listen to me, instead of running yourself down. At the present moment the Count de Gravigny is breakfasting at Bignon's—Bignon's, in the Avenue de l'Opéra."

"So much the worse. I had half a mind to go there. I want something to set me up this morning. But as I'm not anxious to eat my oysters in my venerable uncle's presence, I shall go to Durand's. I'll invite you, if you like."

"Thanks, I've finished breakfast. Besides, you mustn't go to Durand's, you must go to Bignon's."

"But, you idiot, you've just told me that my uncle is there."

"That's exactly why I want you to go there."

"Now you're talking riddles. What shall I say to him?"

"Nothing at all. You will bow to him."

"I've already told you that he has forbidden me to bow to him."

"Then you won't bow to him. It's no use upsetting him. You will take your seat at a table in the room where he is, not too near him, and not too far off. Then you will order a good breakfast—an expensive breakfast."

"That won't be difficult at Bignon's. Only my sole fortune amounts to seven louis, and I must have some dinner."

"You shall have your dinner, and supper too, and with some ladies. I'll bring Caroline, Armande, Adèle—"

"All the 'old guard.' Thanks! I should prefer to have a fling at the Russian's bank that you have just been telling me about."

"There'll be time for all that. Supper first, the bank afterwards. The Russian never gets to the club before two o'clock, and he's generally too drunk to know what he's doing. So it's agreed. You must order the breakfast of a countryman who has come in for a fortune and has come to Paris to spend it. Two dozen oysters, a truffled partridge, a ragout of woodcock—and, above all, the best wines."

"But it'll kill me."

"You need not eat it all. Enough if they serve it. And don't forget to order it in a loud voice, to complain of everything, and swear at the waiters."

"I shall look like a commercial traveller."

"You must attract the attention of everyone in the room, make them look at you and listen to you."

"If you think that I shall be able to make it up with my uncle in that way, I warn you that he'll take up his hat and go off, so as not to have to see a Gravigny behave like that."

"You must avoid that. I didn't think of it, and I modify my instructions so far as behaviour goes; only, be imperious, arrogant even, but don't go too far. It wouldn't seem natural if you caused a row. For the rest, I leave it to you. Be as you are every day. But spend fifty or sixty francs, and let the people around know it."

"And I shall have the four thousand francs?"

"If I don't hand them over to you between this and two o'clock, I give you leave to call me a fool."

"That's the only thing that I never heard you called."

"Always polite to your friends! Never mind. I'm going to show you to-day that I am yours."

"Well, I'm curious to see how you're going to work to get two hundred louis out of the pocket of the most obstinate of uncles. But I'll be off to Bignon's. You're coming, I suppose?"

"No, no. I'll go as far as the door with you, and smoke a couple of cigars outside while you are there."

"Better and better. Then you're going to wait for my uncle and speak to him as he comes out?"

"Certainly not. I shall wait for you. As soon as you have done, come back to me—where? To the refuge here. You'll find me here under the lamp post, and as you can see me a good way off, there'll be no fear of your missing me."

"I fail to see through it, so I give it up. Let's be off," said George, taking his ingenious friend's arm.

They walked together towards the avenue, and their conversation did not flag, although the subject was changed.

"Do you still keep to your lady of fashion?" asked Daubrac.

"Upon my word, I don't know," replied George gaily.

"What! She's given you up?"

"My dear fellow, no one gives me up. It is I who do the giving up when I am so inclined. That's not the case at present. My heart 'moved out' last night, but it hasn't paid any deposit in its new quarters, and it has kept a bit of a hold on the old ones."

"Aren't you conceited!"

"Not at all. I'm getting sick of women, that's all. But tell me, you who know them all, do you know Claudine Marly?"

"Rather! Who doesn't? She's to be seen everywhere. You must have met her a hundred, a thousand, times."

"Yes, without knowing it."

"Naturally. Marchionesses are your speciality, and you don't have much to do with anything else. But you know at least, that Claudine is with Paul Salers, whom you see every day at the club."

"I know that that gentleman's reign is over."

"So much the worse for her. Salers is a well-meaning

man. Claudine will have some difficulty in finding a good substitute. Luckily she can afford to wait. She has made her pile. She used to be with Prince Lounine, who'll take the bank to-night."

"It would be a rum thing if I won two or three thousand louis of him."

"That's always a rum thing. But it wouldn't astonish me much. He was Madame Marly's lover, and she's supposed to bring bad luck."

"Ah!" said George laconically; "we shall see."

"We want ammunition to attack Russia, my dear fellow, and here's the arsenal where you are going to lay in a stock," said Daubrac, pointing to the restaurant opposite which they had arrived. "Your uncle is at the far end of the room, on the right. Go in and do as I explained to you. Your fortune depends on yourself."

"Are you going?"

"Not for long. You know where to find me after it's over. Good luck. See you again soon," said Daubrac; and he started off at a good pace towards the Boulevard.

George de Gravigny was tempted for a moment to run after his friend and tell him that he was not inclined to co-operate in the siege on his uncle's purse. The enterprise seemed to him extravagant, and he rather distrusted the means which Daubrac was going to employ to get four thousand francs out of a gentleman who had quite sufficient experience to defend himself, and whom it would be no easy task to circumvent. But, on the other hand, he was in desperate need of money. Never had he been so hard up. Only the day before a money-lender had refused to lend him a thousand francs at twenty per cent.—a money-lender who in former days had lent him thirty thousand on his signature alone. And for the last fortnight his friends at the club had turned a deaf ear to his request for a loan of ten louis.

George had arrived at the acute stage, at that stage when a man who goes the pace, and who has neither income nor capital, has no choice left between death and dishonour. But George had no notion of blowing his brains out. It would be preferable to come down on his uncle for funds than to borrow of a mistress.

Persuaded by this reasoning, and curious to know how Fernand Daubrac was going to set to work, he walked deliberately in.

At the first glance he saw the Count de Gravigny discussing a *pâté de foie gras* and a bottle of *Château-Giscours*, which he was causing rapidly to disappear. His rustic appetite had caused a large breach in the *pâté*, and the bottle was getting low. If George had reckoned on inheriting from him, he would have had to wait a long time, for his uncle was cut out for a hundred.

He was a fine old man, firm as a rock and ruddy as an apple, his moustache curled upwards, his glance keen, and his movements brisk. He represented to the life a departed epoch; one in which his class did not fear a sword-thrust and never refused good company. For all his sixty-nine years, he had a splendid mien, and no one would have ventured to be lacking in respect to him, still less to seek a quarrel. And although he had lived in the country, he was still at home in Paris. The managers of the fashionable restaurants knew him still, and gave him his title when they waited on him.

On seeing his nephew, who was coming towards him, he coloured up to his very ears, and made a movement as of a man who is preparing himself for a disagreeable interview. One would have said that he was putting himself on guard. He evidently expected to be accosted by George, but he was soon undeceived. George passed him without looking aside, and without raising his hat, but also without marked in-

difference. His manner was composed, and those of the customers who did not know him would never have suspected that they were witnessing a kind of family scene.

These latter, however, were not numerous. A few regular customers scattered about in the three rooms and seated singly, with the exception of Monsieur Paul Salers, who was breakfasting with a friend exactly opposite the count.

George, in order to conform to Fernand Daubrac's arrangements, went and took his seat on the same side of the room as his predecessor in Claudine's intimacy, three tables distance from him, and in full view of his uncle. He settled himself down with the utmost composure, without affecting to avoid looking at anyone, and without staring.

Monsieur de Gravigny did not turn a hair, but he called a waiter at once, and ordered his coffee. He was evidently not disposed to be his nephew's *vis-à-vis* for long, and was anxious to cut the scene short.

"I don't know what Daubrac's intentions are," said George to himself; "but if he's going to operate on my uncle here, he'd better hurry up. I know the old fellow. He won't be here a quarter of an hour longer, unless he happens to get a cigar to his taste. He likes to smoke sitting down."

The presence of Monsieur Salers was rather embarrassing to Madame Marly's new lover, and he affected not to see him; but, to his great surprise, that gentleman, who hardly said good-day to him at the club, gave him a courteous nod—a smiling, and almost friendly nod. George returned it, but he was annoyed. It seemed to him that this unexpected politeness meant to say: "It's very good of you, my dear sir, to have taken my place in the Rue de l'Arcade, and I'm infinitely indebted to you for having taken off my hands a woman who rather bored me."

However, he could not be angry with a gentleman who

greeted him so graciously; and he made up his mind to let things stop there, and not to profit by the opportunity to exchange remarks.

The head waiter was waiting for orders, and George thought fit to carry out to the letter his friend's suggestions. He ordered the two dozen oysters, the truffled partridge, the woodcock, the Château-Yquem to wash down the first, and Romanée-Conti with the partridge; a Gargantuan *menu* which obtained for him the respectful admiration of the head waiter and astonished his neighbours.

His uncle was too far off to hear the enumeration of the viands and wines; but when he saw the bottle with the yellow seal make its appearance, and the ragout which was destined to complete the feast, he began hastily to swallow the coffee which had just been poured out, and took a cigar at hazard from one of the boxes which the waiter piled up before him.

He was evidently saying to himself: "Where does the wretched boy get the money from to pay for such a feast? And what decent man stuffs himself out like that, especially at breakfast? He'll come to a bad end, and I'm not going to witness his gluttony."

George, who knew him by heart, guessed his thoughts, and began to feel amused at the little scene. Laughing up his sleeve, he attacked the first dozen oysters, and gulped down three glasses of Sauterne one after the other, with the sole object of exasperating Monsieur de Gravigny, who, in his quality as a past master in epicureanism, was horrified to see such an act of vandalism.

The uncle, however, stood his ground. He had happened on a choice Havana, and he took infinite pleasure in smoking like a connoisseur—this is to say, slowly.

"He's fuming," thought the nephew, "but he'll be here twenty minutes hence, and Daubrac will have time to perform

his miracle. Deuce take me if I can guess how he's going to set about it, and I'm afraid the sole result to me will be the paying of this bill."

Reflecting thus, he went on despatching his oysters, and involuntarily he caught scraps of sentences from the conversation of his neighbours.

"Yes," said Paul Salers to his friend, "I've given it up. Carriages by the month cost too much and always take you further than you want to go."

"I thought you liked her," replied his friend, who was a well-known speculator.

"Oh, a matter of habit, you know; she has her good qualities. But it's always bad policy to get captivated—especially at my age—and it was a rare stroke of luck to find an excuse for getting out of it at the psychological moment, as Monsieur de Bismarck used to say."

"She'll make it up with the Russian again, I suppose?"

"I doubt it much. Foreigners don't care about reading books which have been too much thumbed, and, besides, when she takes a fancy into her head, nothing stops her. She ruined herself once for a Montmartre strolling player. I'll bet she's on the same tack now."

This dialogue, the meaning of which was only too plain, made George feel uncomfortable, but there was no excuse for raising any objection to it, for the talkers had mentioned no names, and he was forced to swallow the pill in silence.

His uncle, who was watching him from the corners of his eyes, had asked for his bill, and still Daubrac did not appear. For the matter of that, he had not said that he should enter the restaurant, and he finally concluded that his bold comrade proposed to accost the count as he went out. What would he say to him? That is what he could not imagine, and he could find no satisfactory reason for the truffled partridge. It was certainly not a good method of

arousing Monsieur de Gravigny's pity for the sad position of his nearest relation. A man who can feed so well wants no sympathy.

"Shall you play to-night?" asked the speculator presently.

"You know I only play at whist and piquet," replied Monsieur Salers.

"No matter. It will be worth seeing. Prince Lounine plays any stakes. I know some young gentlemen who are reckoning on setting themselves up again at his expense, and who, it is to be hoped, will break themselves on his bank."

"They say he isn't lucky. He came here with a credit of three millions on Rothschild, and he's already drawn one. I have it on good authority."

George listened, and this information was peculiarly interesting to him. He imagined himself, with a run of luck, dipping into the Russian prince's second million. And the thought that he would possibly not have enough to "punt" with that evening, made him tremble with vexation. He even surprised himself wishing that Daubrac's curious project would be successful.

The count had just taken a thousand-franc note from his pocket-book and paid his bill. George knew it of old, that pocket-book, which had often opened to pay the price of his escapades, before his quarrel with his uncle. And George knew that it was always well lined, Monsieur Gravigny having always kept up his former habit of carrying large sums about with him.

At this moment the truffled partridge made its appearance, served up on a silver dish, and the waiter had just solemnly concluded placing it on the table, when Daubrac entered. He came in opportunely, just at the very same moment as the partridge which he had recommended to George. His entry did not at first produce any great

sensation. The count, who had never seen him before, pocketed the change from his thousand-franc note. He did not even raise his eyes. Paul Salers and his companion, who knew Daubrac, affected not to see him. They did not hold him in very high esteem, and were glad enough to avoid him. Much puzzled as to what his friend was about to do, and not knowing what attitude to assume towards him, since Daubrac had not instructed him what part he had to play, George felt called upon at all hazards to smile to the new comer.

He soon saw that his politeness was out of season. Daubrac advanced, his hat over his eyes, knitting his brows and pursing his lips, stiff as a gendarme about to carry out an arrest, solemn as a mute at a funeral.

"What the deuce is the meaning of all this?" thought George to himself. His friend came as far as the next table behind him, and opened proceedings with this remark, uttered in a loud voice:

"Here you are, sir! I've found you at last."

"What's the meaning of this?" said George, dumbfounded.

"The meaning of this is, that I'm tired of waiting," replied Daubrac drily.

"Waiting for what?" asked George, who began already to be annoyed.

"The money that you've owed me for the last six months. Don't profess to know nothing about it."

"And you come here to demand it?"

"I must demand it here, as you're never to be found at home. I've written to you ten times. You haven't taken the trouble to answer my letters. You treat me as if I were a tradesman, and you know I am not a tradesman, and that I obliged you under special circumstances. You ought to have deprived yourself of everything, to pay me this sum, which I lent you to get you out of a

mess, and which you promised to let me have within the week. You have not fulfilled that promise, which would have been sacred to anyone but yourself. I've waited a long time in patience, but I see that you're trifling with me, and I don't intend to stand it. I had some consideration, because I imagined that you were down in the world. I shall have none in future. I'm hard up as well, and that's why I can't patronise Bignon's."

"Sir! you'll repent what you have done," cried George.

"No threats, please. Our position towards one another is perfectly plain. You are my debtor, and a debtor can't fight his creditor. Pay me, and then we can go out together as soon as you like. But you won't prevent me from speaking. I have a right to do it. I was passing along the Avenue de l'Opéra when I saw you seated here. I could not look on the revolting spectacle calmly. When a man is in debt he doesn't breakfast on a partridge washed down with fine wines; he pays up first, even if he has to live on Duval soup afterwards. So you must only blame yourself for it, if I've insulted you in public. It is you who force me to it, sir."

The tableau was a striking one. Daubrac, standing up in a menacing attitude; George, foaming with rage, and ready to rush on the traitor who had, no doubt, pretended to be his friend in order to play him this scurvy trick; the Count de Gravigny, very attentive and very agitated, debating whether he should go and interfere or leave the room; Paul Salers and his companion, astonished at witnessing such a scene, and wondering why Daubrac was thus attacking a man whose friend he boasted that he was; the indifferent spectators who were breakfasting at some distance off, sneering or shrugging their shoulders; the staff, scandalised, whispering in corners, and debating whether they should eject this gentleman, whose violent language dis-

graced an establishment of the first rank; all, actors and spectators, formed a tableau seldom to be witnessed.

So far it was only a comedy, but from George's face it was to be conjectured that this comedy would serve as a prologue to a drama. His eyes flashed, and his clenched hand grasped the knife with which he was about to carve the partridge. Daubrac, in order to guard against a sudden onslaught, stepped back two or three paces, after having launched his tirade, and continued, coolly:

"Well, sir, I am waiting."

"You won't wait long," replied George, in a voice choking with rage. "You'll be paid to-night, and to-morrow morning you will make the acquaintance of my seconds."

"I'll do so if I have my money."

"You shall have it, sir, and I promise you that to-morrow by this time you'll have had six inches of steel in you."

"I'll do my best to return the compliment, but I should prefer to be paid at once. We might fight to-day. For the matter of that, you can always find me when you want me. You know where," said Daubrac, turning on his heel. And off he went, without removing his hat.

There was an icy silence after this theatrical departure. It is always the effect which an altercation produces on those who have not taken any part in it. The waiters exchanged glances of consternation, and the chief forgot the partridge, which was getting cold.

George did not make the mistake of addressing his companions, who were watching him from the corners of their eyes. He remained calm and dignified, although choking with passion. He did not even look at his uncle, who appeared to be much more upset than he was himself, and who rose and walked towards the door. He called to the waiters and continued his breakfast.

His *sang-froid* was superb. If Claudine had been able

to see him at that moment, she would have flung herself on his neck before everyone. If he had played the part on the stage he would have taken the house by storm.

But appearances are deceptive, and as he sipped his *Château-Giscours* he planned terrible vengeance. To kill Daubrac would be nothing. He would strike him publicly at the club—after having paid him, be it well understood. And here was the difficulty, for he knew not in the least where to get the four thousand francs.

"I'll steal them if necessary," he said to himself, "but I'll exterminate the scamp who dared to treat me in this fashion, and before that fellow Salers, who'll carry the story all over Paris. I've taken his mistress from him, and he won't spare me. To think that I allowed myself to be taken in by that wretched Daubrac! To think that I believed in I don't know what sort of a comedy to melt my uncle! Daubrac simply wanted to spoil all the chance of a reconciliation; I ought to have known him better; he's a vile creature, who would do anything for money, and who plotted nothing else than to disgrace me, for the sake of getting his four thousand francs. Well, he shall have them, but he sha'n't have time to spend them, for I'm certain of killing him. I'm the insulted party, I have the choice of weapons; I'll choose swords and spit him at the first pass."

This pleasing prospect caused him to partially forget that the problem of the immediate payment of the debt remained to be solved, but it soon presented itself to his mind in all its terrors. He turned over all the methods of getting the money, and he recognised very quickly that not one of them was practicable. The money-lenders knew that he was at the end of his tether and he had no hope left of setting himself up at baccarat. Cards might have been a last resource, but a man can't play cards without money. George racked his brains in vain.

He had come down to contemplating the last solution of desperate questions—the revolver—when, just as he had almost finished the bottle which he had so bravely begun, an idea came into his head.

"Why not ask Claudine to lend me two hundred louis?" he thought. "It won't incommode her, and I can pay her back the first time I'm in luck. Two hundred louis? No, three hundred; I'll pay that scoundrel Daubrac, and I shall have a hundred left to punt with to-night. It's a chance I sha'n't have again, for if the Russian goes to smash the first time, it will sicken him, and he won't try it again. Well, I've nothing else to do, and not a moment to spare. Claudine told me this morning that she shouldn't go out all day, and she'll be all the more charmed to see me that I didn't promise to go there again."

Having come to this conclusion, George ordered coffee, without having tasted the ragout. He was not particularly anxious to follow Daubrac's instructions to the end, inasmuch as he understood less than ever the meaning of this sumptuous breakfast. It was not unlike a practical joke on the part of a creditor who forces his debtor to spend his last sou, and George made up his mind to make the inventor of this costly farce pay dearly for it.

He certainly had some scruples on the question of the loan which he was reduced to contract with an "irregular," but he soothed them by means of specious argument, and he hastened to pay the imposing total of a desperately long bill. Barely did his seven louis suffice to do so. The restaurant had gradually emptied. Paul Salers had disappeared, without repeating the bow with which he had deemed it his duty to greet his successor, three-quarters of an hour before. Daubrac's impertinence had already borne fruit.

Once outside, George walked towards the Boulevard. It was on his way to the Rue de l'Arcade, and he hardly gave

a thought to his appointment with Daubrac ; he thought so little of it, in fact, that he walked half-way across the Place de l'Opéra without seeing him.

Yet Daubrac had planted himself in the middle of one of the refuges, and as he saw George in the distance, he made a speaking-trumpet of his hands, called him by name, and began to wave in the air, like a flag, a small packet of bank notes which he held between his finger and thumb.

George's wrath was aroused when he saw Daubrac putting on airs of triumph underneath the lamp-post ; and without paying any heed to his telegraphic signals he rushed on him with the impetuosity of a wounded wild boar. In three strides he reached the refuge and shouted to the traitor, shaking his fist :

" We'll settle our accounts, as you are here."

" That's exactly what I was waiting for you for," replied Daubrac. " Here are the four thousand. I'm sorry I didn't ask six. He would have paid up just the same."

" Never mind the notes. You've insulted me in a restaurant. I'm going to give myself the satisfaction of caning you in the street."

" How splendid you are in that part ! " cried Daubrac, bursting out laughing. " You took the cue to perfection in Bignon's, and you're keeping it up outside. It's splendid ! You certainly missed your vocation ; you were born to be an actor."

" Not a word more, or I'll break my stick across your head." George said this in such a tone of voice, that Daubrac, changing his tune, said :

" You're in earnest, then ? You're behaving like a madman. So you took the scene in the restaurant to heart. Upon my word, I thought of taking your uncle in, but I never dreamt of doing the same for you. It's a great success, and I'm cleverer than I thought."

"Enough! will you tell me—"

"As much as you like. But take the notes. I've been brandishing them now for five minutes. The wind might take them away, not to mention that pickpockets have good eyes and good legs."

"I'll have none of the money."

"All right! you won't say that directly, when I've told you my little story. But I'll put the notes in safely first, for fear they should fly away," said Daubrac, putting them in his greatcoat pocket.

"My dear fellow, can't you guess where they came from?"

"I don't want to know."

"You must know, though, for they're yours. Did you notice, my good friend, that Count Roger de Gravigny left the restaurant directly after I did? You don't answer? You sulk? All right. I'll go on. Your uncle, then, followed close after me. I walked slowly, stopping at every shop window. He caught me up outside Goupil's, the picture shop. There we had a short conversation, which I wrote down on my memory to retail to you. Listen, your uncle is speaking.

"'Sir, you took a very high tone just now in addressing Viscount George de Gravigny. I should like to know who you are?'

"Myself, politely but drily:

"'Sir, my name is Fernand Daubrac. If I spoke severely to Monsieur de Gravigny, it was because he deserved it. Formerly I had the honour of being his friend, but he behaved in such a way that I feel no longer bound to consider his feelings. My only desire is to fight him; unfortunately, I shall not even have that satisfaction, for, in spite of his rhodomontade, I'm certain that he won't pay me.'

"The uncle colours and continues:

"'How much does he owe you?'

"'Four thousand francs,' coldly replies your comrade. 'The sum is not an enormous one, but I am not rich enough to lose it without missing it.'

"Upon this the uncle takes out his pocket-book with a grand air, extracts the four notes that I've just shown you, and presents them to me, saying:

"'Here they are, sir.'

"This was the proper moment for crying off, and I did not let it slip.

"'Excuse me, sir. I only accept money from those who owe it to me.'

"'Sir,' replied the old gentleman, 'I am Monsieur George de Gravigny's uncle, I have therefore the right to come to his help when he is insulted, and I am anxious to put him in a position to run you through. Therefore'—but you can see it all. Your friend affects once more to do the modest, but he does not draw his hand back, and Count Roger slips four thousand francs into it, saying with a superb air:

"'My nephew will know to-night that you are paid. I don't wish him to kill you, but I hope he'll give you a good lesson.'

"And he turns on his heel, after having given me a stiff bow. And now, my dear fellow, what do you think of my idea? Wasn't I right in saying it was worth four thousand francs?"

"I say that you have done a blackguardly action," cried George. The indignation which his answer expressed was sincere. However, there were signs of his relenting already.

"You're always down on anyone," replied the plotter, without putting himself out. "It's a good plant, nothing more; you talk big, but you've done just the same thing."

"Nothing equal to that."

"Well, it was rather strong. But will you swear that you never came the sham debt dodge with your uncle?"

"If I did so, I did it by myself."

"That would have been impossible this time. My piece was perforce one for two characters. I had the most difficult part; you were only walking gentleman."

"To attack my honour in the presence of ten people, that's what you call playing a comedy! Did you even notice who were there?"

"Waiters, countrymen, strangers—just the audience I wanted."

"You forget Monsieur Salers."

"Claudine's lover? he's an old hand, who won't be much shocked about such a trifle. And, besides, what does his opinion matter to you? Are you afraid that he'll tell his charmer?"

"If she was the only one to get to know it, it would be more than enough."

"Hullo! You've relieved him of Claudine, I suppose. That's the change of quarters of your heart you were talking about a while back. But what then? Do you think Madame Marly would be vexed if she was to hear about it? She'll only think that we're clever fellows, that's all Women, my dear fellow, always forgive their lovers for having made two hundred louis. Besides, you know well enough that their moral ideas are of the haziest description. What is there for you to be anxious about? Paul Salers won't go and say what he doesn't know. I'll answer for it that he took my little joke as serious."

"Oh, I don't doubt that. And all the club will know to-night that I've been horribly insulted at Bignon's."

"Nonsense! By a friend!"

"You're not a friend of mine. And I promise you it's a case of fighting."

"A duel about nothing. By all means, if you like. The weather is beautiful, and a morning walk in the Meudon woods will just suit me."

"We shall see whether you'll find it so pleasant, after I've put my sword through you."

"I shall do my best to prevent it. You know I'm a decent swordsman. But you make a strange miscalculation of the consequences of the little trick which I invented to set you on your legs. Remember that I shall maintain everywhere that you have paid me. Remember that your coolness in the restaurant was perfect. Your answers were splendid. And, as a conclusion, a duel which will be in all the papers. You will wound me in the arm. You see I'm determined to do things well. And, when you make your appearance again, everyone will recognise you, even those who shunned you yesterday. And then you'll be in funds. With four thousand francs in his pocket, a clever man like you re-establishes his credit, and Paris is at his feet."

"I don't want your four thousand francs," said George angrily.

"Really? truth?" asked Daubrac. "Then I shall be forced to keep them, for you don't imagine that I'm going to take them back to your uncle. I should have to confess that I have been trifling with him, and he would take it rather ill."

"It's yours, since I owe it you."

"I might say that, if you leave me with the money, you'll be no less an accomplice in the plot against Monsieur de Gravigny, for you'll have paid your debt out of his money. But I'll be content with telling you that at the present moment I'm in no need of it. I'm not rolling in gold, but I've ample for a month to come. So I'm not at all anxious to cease to be your creditor. You'll make better use of the money than me. It will serve to break Prince Lounine's bank to-night."

"Break it yourself."

"I shouldn't be successful. I can't take advantage of

luck. I've not pluck, except on the Bourse, whilst I've seen you win forty thousand francs at Monaco, at one sitting, and all with your last louis."

George raised his head, like a charger at the sound of the trumpet. His resolution was hanging by a thread.

"You've made up your mind?" said Daubrac. "Pity! I had an idea that you'd ruin the Russian. I'd made up my mind to ask you to let me stand in half."

This time George seized the bait which his friend held out to him.

"It's understood that we fight," he said abruptly, "and that you won't speak to me again until we have fought?"

"That's the style!" cried Daubrac, "I knew you'd come round. Here are the notes, my dear fellow. To-morrow we shall be rich men."

George still hesitated a little, but took them. He little thought that at the moment that he was pocketing them a drama was being enacted in the Rue de l'Arcade.

III.

The Marchioness de Benserade's maiden name was Louise Plantin. She was the daughter of "poor but honest parents," who had given her an excellent moral training and education. Her father, a chief clerk in a ministry, under three governments, prided himself on his disinterestedness and philosophy, from which had resulted that he had been placed on the retired list before the usual age, and without the consolation of the ribbon of the Legion of Honour. Her mother, a countrywoman, with a small dowry, but respectably connected, had passed her life in bewailing their modest income, and in dreaming of a rich match for her dear Louise.

Louise had learnt from her tenderest infancy all that is useless to portionless girls—music, drawing, and the art of dressing. She was destined for society—just as on the stage the porters' only daughters are so destined—and for high society. Madame Plantin had a few distant connections in the Faubourg Saint-Germain. The fair child had no means wherewith to pay for her entry into noble houses; but she reckoned on her beauty, her grace, her native elegance and her ready wit.

And of a truth she was not wrong, for one would have said that nature had cut her out for a duchess. She was of a beauty which is seldom seen now, the beauty of the eighteenth century, with a sweet and melancholy expression which tempered the brilliancy of her eyes and the vivacity of her motions. A Dubarry, dreamy and not dimpled.

Tall, slender and graceful as an Englishwoman, with fair hair, of which she could have formed a veil, like Geneviève de Brabant, she showed good breeding to the very tips of her pink finger-nails.

Intelligent, acute, taking in everything and not hampered by prejudice, a sceptic in petticoats, with ardent aspirations towards luxury, and passions the more violent that she was forced to repress them. In order to win a husband a certain amount of insignificancy is necessary. At the age of seventeen she had very decided opinions on social life. To be rich was all-important in her eyes, for riches give liberty. Rather than resign herself, like her mother, to household drudgery, she would have gone to any lengths. But she preferred all the same to sail under the flag of a man who would give her a name, rank and fortune. She would submit to his being neither very young nor very handsome. One cannot have everything.

And her perseverance in seeking had been rewarded. Just as she had passed her twentieth birthday, before her majority—that first stage on the journey which leads to old maidship—the wished-for husband had presented himself. He was forty, he had an income of as many thousand francs, and he was a marquis. He had seen Louise Plantin at the marriage of one of his friends, and had inwardly sworn on the spot to marry her. Such things happen occasionally outside the pages of novels.

Pierre de Benserade was a narrow-minded and exceptional character, who would only be guided by the rules which those of his own rank obey. He had always lived in independent style, and he preferred the quiet of the fields to the turmoil of Paris. After having served in the cavalry until he attained a captain's rank, he had resigned his commission in order to devote his attention to his estates, and he had only kept up just sufficient connection with the

aristocracy to avoid falling out of their ranks. For the last ten years he had sworn to choose a woman to his fancy, without troubling much about her fortune or even her birth. He had enough for two, as he believed, and it was sufficient for him that his wife was agreeable to him; provided, however, that she had no defects, for he would not have married any girl whose character was not above suspicion, nor allied himself with a shady family.

Mademoiselle Louise Plantin had never given an opportunity for scandal, and her parents enjoyed a reputation for undoubted respectability. Her father passed for a stoic, a sage, a scorner of great things; her mother had been notoriously virtuous, and it was said that she had sacrificed herself when she consented to take the name of Plantin, for she was the daughter of a squire of Perche, reduced by misfortune to till his own land.

The matrimonial negotiations had proceeded apace. Six weeks after the first interview Louise was a marchioness, and even a *Chatelainé*, for the honeymoon was passed in an ancient manor-house, built by Monsieur de Benserade's ancestors in the heart of Normandy. Two years later Louise had seen through her husband and lost certain illusions as to the joys of marriage. She had dreamt of emancipation, and she saw that her dreams were vain. She had fallen in with a man of iron, who loved her as a middle-aged man loves, who understood the serious aspect of life only, who had married her in order to have a beautiful and good wife, children strong as their father, and a suitable establishment in the country.

This was most assuredly not the idea of the charming creature whom he had elevated to a title for the sake of her beautiful face. However, she put a good face on it, and played her part of a grand lady to perfection, visiting the farmers, mixing with her neighbours, charming the good

folks in the little town by her graceful manners, astonishing them with her dresses, and organising shooting-parties to which the officers of the garrison were invited. Her husband was proud of her, and the only fault he had to find with her was, that she bore him no children.

These first years were years of truce. The marchioness was feeling her ground. She practised her part, studied her lord and master, read assiduously the *Life in Paris* and other chronicles of society, in order to prepare herself for appearing on a stage more suited to her capacities. She was undergoing her preparation, awaiting an opportunity to plant her foot in the Paris whither all her ambition tended

This opportunity was a great lawsuit in which Monsieur de Benserade became involved at the end of the third year. It was a question of some money invested in a financial company. It was absolutely necessary to see lawyers, advocates, business men, and judges. The marquis detested travelling, and, in order to avoid perpetual moving, he determined to pass the winter in Paris. He had also a dislike to hotels, and Louise had no difficulty in persuading him to hire and furnish a suite of rooms.

The most difficult step was taken. It only remained now to strengthen the first advantage that she had ever obtained. She was successful in this, thanks to the complicity of a good-natured doctor, who declared that the air of the country was very prejudicial to Madame de Benserade's health during the wet season. Paris or the South. The husband, who was unwilling to move so far from his estates, decided upon Paris.

For three years Louise had lived in the Rue de l'Arcade from October till April. The success had been a great one, but she would have liked to complete it by persuading the marquis to entertain. Unfortunately, she had encountered an inflexible will. Monsieur de Benserade had a horror of

what is called society. He said that his means would not allow him to keep up two establishments, and that he preferred to live plentifully on his estates during the summer to incommoding himself in giving *soirées* on the second floor of a house in Paris.

The thing was settled. The marchioness had had to content herself with a modest establishment; a cook, a maid, and a groom, chosen, with a view to economy, from amongst the marquis's tenants. No dissipations beyond visits to dowagers, distant relatives of Monsieur Benserade, who received her somewhat coldly, and who, from time to time, offered her tea, seasoned by edifying discourses. Louise found little pleasure in this, and the life that her husband mapped out for her bored her desperately.

The critical age arrived: five-and-twenty, the age when women who have made ill-matched marriages ask themselves whether it is best to persevere or desert the paths of virtue. For Louise, the question was already decided. In plighting her troth, she had not even heard the fatal vows pronounced.

The lover was doomed to appear. He appeared. And she had the vexation of not being able to choose from among the frequenters of her house, for her house was never thrown open. Being obliged to trust to some chance meeting, she had at least had some regard for the proprieties. George de Gravigny had first seen her at a charity sale, and had taken upon himself to follow her, without receiving any encouragement from her. The adventure had concluded as was only probable it would, but the siege had lasted three months, and three yearly absences had not broken off the dangerous connection. They wrote to one another during the summer, and in the winter they were hardly away from one another, for the marquis was rebuilding a wing of his house, and left his wife alone for three days out of the seven.

The good gentleman was not jealous, for he did not think that he had any reason to be so ; but the marchioness knew him well enough to be certain that he would never forgive an act of infidelity. She was not ignorant of the fact that in deceiving him she was risking her life and that of her lover.

Nor had the marchioness come to risk such a terrible stake for the pleasure of doing what so many other women do from pure coquettishness ! In her dreams of former days, the lover was to her as a pleasant accessory, a trifling diversion, an almost indispensable accompaniment of fashionable life, tolerated by the world, and endured by the husband. The perusal of papers which chronicled scandals in high life had perverted her mind. Her ideas of marriage would have suited those of the time of Louis XV.

She had certainly perceived that Monsieur de Benserade had neither the manners nor the character of a marquis under the old régime. And the life which she led in the town or the country hardly gave an opportunity for those intrigues which last as long as fashions last. The only men who came to the château were by no means tempting country beaux, or, now and then, young cavalry officers, pretty birds of passage, who flew away after the shooting-party was over. To the Rue de l'Arcade no one came.

Louise, reduced to make her choice elsewhere than among her immediate surroundings, had settled upon George de Gravigny : firstly, because he was a viscount ; and secondly, because she fancied that he would open to her the doors of a new life, initiate her in forbidden pleasures, show her a Paris debarred to virtuous women, the Paris of festive parties, second-rate theatres, and private supper-rooms.

This was little in comparison to what had been her ambition, to that destiny which had been her dream ; but still it was something. There was the delight of fresh sensations,

and the fascination of danger. To go out in the morning and surprise George in his bachelor's chambers; to light, after having wet it between her lips, the cigar which he was going to smoke, to rummage in his drawers for letters from old flames, and scold him for the nights spent at the club. All the follies, all the child's play of lately emancipated mistresses. To wait for him in a cab at night-fall, to go and dine with him at a fashionable restaurant, slipping in by a private door; to hide herself at the back of a box at the theatre, and get George to tell her the names of the actresses' lovers, who filled the house. She had ventured to go to the Folies-Bergères and the rink, on his arm, trusting to the thickness of her veil to prevent being recognised. She wanted to see the Opera Ball, and she had seen it.

These acts of imprudence had attraction for her; she took a bitter pleasure in risking her reputation, her life, and that of George, in placing herself at the mercy of chance, in braving the risk of a meeting with, or unexpected return of, her husband. But all this was but a kind of mania, and she would soon have tired of it. Perhaps even she would have returned to the paths of virtue, after a short excursion along perilous ways, if it had only been a matter of a lively imagination or curiosity. At first it was nothing beyond this, and she might have returned home, satisfied by one trial, like those wise men who go a long journey on leaving college, and never quit their fireside again during the rest of their days, living on their recollections and not caring to face the storm again.

Unfortunately the marchioness had concluded by falling desperately in love with George de Gravigny. In her search after pleasure she had found love, a violent, exacting, dominating, and absorbing love. At first she had been deceived as to the nature of the feeling within her; she had taken it for a caprice, and, later, when she saw that this caprice

did not pass away as quickly as she had expected, she had tried to deceive herself as to its duration, to lie to herself by saying that she should soon grow weary of it. She had even gone so far as to endeavour to break off the connection, and when she had persuaded herself that George was consoled for her loss, she found that she could not live without him, that she was prepared to sacrifice everything for him, and that she would rather see him dead than that she should have a rival.

She had insisted on playing with fire; she had burnt her heart; her punishment was beginning. Her life was a hell; her husband inspired her with horror; her social obligations weighed on her like heavy chains. She longed for the time to come when she should throw off all restraint and make her disgrace public. The fixed idea of flying from her husband's house haunted her sleepless nights. Fear alone kept her back, the fear of drawing on her lover the vengeance of the man whom she dreaded even more than she hated.

George, however, did not share these mad ideas. He endeavoured, unsuccessfully, to calm her, but he refused to lend himself to the extravagances which she meditated; twenty times she had implored him to leave France with her and never return. He had always replied that it was absurd; that, moreover, it was impossible for him to keep a woman abroad, seeing that he had not enough to feed her; that it was better to bear the burden of a false position, and tolerate a husband who interfered but little with them, for he had not the least suspicion of the truth.

The bewitched marchioness had little liking for this good advice, but she resigned herself to follow it, for the very good reason that she could not do otherwise. She had her revenge, however, in making George put himself in the most dangerous positions. She forced him to call for her

during the marquis's absence. For this it was necessary that she should send her servants out of the way on the most frivolous pretexts, without troubling herself about their comments, the porter's indiscreetness or the neighbours' curiosity. She knew perfectly well that Monsieur de Benserade never gave her warning of his return, that he always carried a loaded revolver, and that he was quite capable of using it under circumstances which the Penal Code has foreseen. In vain. So she would have it, and so it was. George was a party to the arrangement, from carelessness, possibly from bravado; and also from the attraction which an invasion of the ferocious husband's own house had for him.

This rashness was bound to end ill. Sunday was the fatal day. The marquis, having no workmen to superintend, had determined to return to Paris, and he had arrived at the Rue de l'Arcade five minutes after George, who, very luckily, found means to decamp. He had just time to escape by the window which looked on Madame Marly's providential balcony. The marchioness had been within an ace of jumping after him, but had judged it best to face the storm. It was the only chance of saving her lover. And she had played to perfection the part of a woman who is surprised by her husband's unexpected return.

Monsieur de Benserade had not planned his return beforehand. He had arrived full of confidence, and much occupied by thoughts of his building operations. The servants' absence had rather surprised him, and his wife's behaviour had aroused in him a vague feeling of suspicion. Clever as she was, Louise had allowed some amount of emotion to be apparent, and had made her explanations somewhat lamely. A scream uttered when the marquis approached the open window had spoilt all. Monsieur de Benserade, enlightened by that scream, had guessed the

truth. He had rushed out like a madman, locking his wife in the room, and had made his furious visit to his first-floor neighbour.

During the time that this titled Sganarelle was interviewing Claudine, the poor marchioness had endured terrible agony. She knew that George had not fallen into the street. She had had time to catch a glimpse of him stretched on the balcony, and after her husband had gone she had seen that he was no longer there. What had become of him? Had he been able to make his escape from the house, or had he been forced to conceal himself with Madame Marly? and if he was still there, what would Monsieur de Benserade do to him? She passed one of these half-hours which whiten women's hair, and she swore to have done with this life of anxiety which she was leading, should her good star save her from the terrible danger of the time being.

She soon saw that there is a providence for lovers, and that husbands are always in the wrong. The marquis came back hanging his head, and made the grievous mistake of apologising for his fit of jealousy. He acknowledged that his suspicions had no foundation, and he went so far as to entreat her forgiveness.

The opportunity for making him atone for his faults was a splendid one, and Madame de Benserade did not neglect it. She played the part of legitimate indignation like a consummate artist; and that of conciliation, which followed, cost the marquis dear. Louise made him go down on his knees and promise that he would never suspect her more. To tell the truth, it mattered little to her, for she was firmly resolved to leave her husband's roof very shortly, but she was eager to first of all avenge herself by humiliating the man whom she detested.

The marquis did not enter into the details of his foolish

expedition. He was by no means anxious to relate the ridiculous part he had played between Claudine's late lover and the man whom he had taken for the new one. And from her husband's silence Madame de Benserade came to the conclusion that he had not found George de Gravigny with her obliging neighbour.

This being so, the next day, the marquis having gone out in a peaceful frame of mind to see his architect, the marchioness determined not to lose a moment in carrying out two projects which she had formed in her mind. She was going to her lover's, partly to see him again, but more especially to inform him that the time for hesitating was past, that she had had enough of married slavery, and that she wished to fly with him. She was also wishful to thank the courageous lady who had saved George.

Monsieur de Benserade was not to be home until dinner. The marchioness had plenty of time to pay the two visits she had planned, and she had no fear that her husband would return before his time and surprise her. She had cowed him. He regretted his bad behaviour, and, like all violent men, he had passed suddenly from furious jealousy to blind confidence.

Certainly the idea had never occurred to him to have his wife watched during his absence, nor to inquire of the servants what visitors she had had whilst he was out. For the matter of that, they would not have been able to give him any information; they had noticed nothing, and knew nothing, for Madame de Benserade kept them at a distance. It is all very well for an "irregular" to take her maid into her confidence with regard to love matters. The marchioness was a grand lady, although she was born Louise Plantin.

She considered that she was out of her place in this house in the Rue de l'Arcade, where all sorts of people lived, and

she did not associate with her neighbours. She was not unaware of the fact that the first floor was occupied by a Madame Marly, whose trade was love. She met her frequently on the stairs, and thought her pretty. She had even noticed her style of dressing, and had imitated, without copying it. But she had affected not to see her when she passed her, and she had forbidden her maid-servant to speak to Olga. All this was a matter of appearance, and nothing more, for she had no dislike to "gay" ladies. She even envied their lot when she had to take her departure for the dull *château* of Vexin, instead of flitting away like Claudine to Trouville or Dieppe, and she sometimes fancied that she should like to live the life of these women for six months, just as one fancies visiting strange lands. Possibly she would have made a trial of their existence, could she have done so without injury to her good name; but there is a vast difference between these foolish thoughts and a friendship with an immoral character. One must keep one's distance when one is a marchioness. If an aristocracy did not exist already, women would invent one.

But in a few hours all had changed. Passion had obtained the mastery over interest and pride. Louise had made up her mind to cast her title in the gutter, in order to belong wholly to George de Gravigny. He had refused to elope with her, according to the practice in vogue in England, where lovers start boldly for the Continent when the conjugal burden is too heavy. He would not refuse to live with her in Paris, beneath the very nose of her husband, with whom he could easily settle his differences, if the latter proved unfriendly. And at the moment of crossing the boundary which still divided her from the outcasts of society, there was no reason why, for the sake of acquitting a debt of gratitude, she should not cross the threshold of one who was about to become almost her equal.

She had no knowledge of Claudine Marly beyond a slight, and, on the whole, favourable one. George, whom she was fond of asking about these ladies, had told her that Claudine had settled down, and that she repaid in fidelity to Monsieur Salers that which the capitalist gave her in shining money. George only knew her by sight and reputation, but he said that she was superior to most of her kind. It was said that she had been well brought up, and could talk well. She even had a name for cleverness and affection. Too much affection, to tell the truth, said some ill-natured people.

Why should the marchioness fear an interview with this exception among *demi-mondaines?* It was evident that Madame Marly knew all, since she had favoured George's escape. Even supposing she had not asked him from whence he came—and this was improbable—she could not have supposed that this charming stranger had fallen from a star. And, in addition to this, the marquis's appearance and his furious behaviour must have made things clearer. Madame Marly, by misleading him adroitly, had become the auxiliary, almost the accomplice, of the imperilled lovers. What more natural than that she should go and thank her? What could be less embarrassing than to talk to her in all frankness? Women who love understand one another so quickly. And Madame de Benserade knew well that Claudine must love some other man than this Paul Salers, who was foolish enough to play towards her a part which sufficiently resembled that of Blue Beard.

So, about two o'clock, just at the time when George was apostrophising his enterprising friend on the Place de l'Opéra, the marchioness, in a plush hat and fur mantle, placed her dainty foot on the first step which led from the virtuous to the equivocal floor. She had previously dispatched her servant to her dressmaker's, and she had no

fear of encountering any one, having carefully given a glance to make certain that no one was coming up.

And yet she hesitated a moment before ringing the frail one's bell. She felt herself for an instant in the past ; she had a vision which faded away almost instantaneously : her marriage, the old Norman house, the marquis galloping on his great black horse—all these remembrances of the life which she was about to renounce for ever came across her mind and as quickly disappeared, like a flash of lightning which glitters and vanishes in the gloomy night.

Olga came and opened the door , Olga, piquant and joyous as a servant girl to whom her mistress has just given an extra holiday. Olga had that day permission to stop out till midnight, madame having decided to dine from home. Olga was all for Ernest, who was already awaiting her in the kitchen.

She recognised the marchioness at the first glance, and her face showed that the visit was unexpected. As she was by no means deficient in sense, she did not imagine for a moment that she came as an enemy. Olga was full of conjectures as to what had passed before, during, and after the visit of which George had been the hero.

"Can I see Madame Marly?" asked Madame de Benserade quietly.

"I don't know, madame," stammered the maid, much more flurried than the marchioness, "madame told me not to let anyone in."

"But she is at home?"

"Yes, madame. Only she is going to dress to go out."

"Go and tell her that it is I who wish to speak to her."

Olga had the sense not to ask the visitor her name, which she knew perfectly well, and she quickly decided to admit her. She said to herself that, after yesterday's incident, an explanation between the "late" and the "present" was

inevitable. It was better that Claudine should await this explanation at home, than that she should go and seek it. She would be on her own ground, and consequently at an advantage. Relying on this reasoning, Olga showed Madame de Beuserade into the drawing-room, and went and told her mistress.

Left alone, the marchioness looked with a curious eye at the furniture and ornaments. She had never set foot inside the house of a lady of this description, and had formed quite a different idea of what it would be like. She had expected to find more luxury and less taste, and she was obliged to admit that here all was correct. She had even the chagrin to see a small picture by Detaille, which she had wished for the winter before, and which Monsieur de Beuserade had refused to buy, giving as an excuse that the rebuilding of his *château* was ruining him.

"This creature is luckier than I am," she thought. "She has her fancies gratified."

At the moment when the marchioness was indulging in this reflection Claudine entered. She was beautiful, she was five years younger; tranquil happiness makes women older; emotion gives them youth, and Claudine, who had been deteriorating for the last three years, felt that pleasure had made her young again in a few hours.

She had not expected anyone, and yet she was dressed to receive company. The heart's awakenings are first expressed in the toilette. Claudine had dedicated to her new love a ravishing costume, a new thing in morning-dresses, a harmony in plush, satin and Valenciennes lace.

Women all talk this learned language, and describe such elegancies in terms of their own. They decipher a costume as a paleographic artist deciphers a coat of arms. The marchioness deciphered and admired. She was under arms, and her walking attire defied the criticism of Madame Marly,

who with one look had inspected her from head to foot When two women meet the same thing always goes on.

But Madame de Benserade was smiling and Claudine on the contrary was serious, her eyes wore a questioning expression. She was asking herself what this defeated riva would say to her, and was preparing herself to reply. Had the marchioness come to complain? Madame Marly knew not, but she was firmly resolved not to yield the conquered fortress.

"You were expecting me, were you not?" asked Louise sweetly.

"Certainly not, madame," replied Claudine, much astonished at this opening. "I must confess that your visit is a totally unexpected honour."

"I should be very ungrateful if I had not come. We do not belong to the same class of society, but what matters that? I have never felt anything but sympathy for you, and since yesterday I have been under an obligation to you. You have saved me, and you have saved—why should I not tell you?— my lover."

"Her lover!" thought Claudine, "she doesn't know, then, that he is mine?" Claudine's face had changed, and the marchioness misunderstood the feeling which had caused her to turn pale.

"You are surprised that I talk like this," she said. "You do not know me. You think I am one of those foolish women who herd together in their forced virtue and look on others from the height of their grandeur. Pray understand that I am not one of these. I am for equality in love, and if I remain in the class in which I was born, it is because I should lose by the change. But I think you would have done the same as I."

"It only depended on myself whether I should remain there or not," replied Madame Marly coldly.

Madame de Benserade was a clever woman, and yet she had just made a great mistake. She had wounded the pride of a woman whom she had thought to flatter, by placing her on the same footing as herself. The marchioness was out of her element. She went wrong through ignorance. She did not know the "irregulars." She was not aware that the first of all their pretensions is to be placed in the same category as respectable people, or even as great ladies. They profess to let it be understood that they have voluntarily left the paths of virtue, and they take a pleasure in remembering their early days of innocence. Those who have been brought up at Saint-Denis boast of the fact at every opportunity. Claudine, not having had that advantage, was always eager to talk of her husband, who was decorated with the Legion of Honour, and whom she had deserted for a strolling player.

The marchioness saw at once that she had made a mistake, and endeavoured to remedy her want of tact. She was anxious to please Claudine, firstly because she thought that she owed her a debt of gratitude, and also because she had some ideas with regard to companionship between women. She had always imagined a kind of tacit association of the persecuted against the persecutors—that is to say, against the masters whom they only tolerate on the condition that they may deceive them.

"I know," she said, smiling, "that you are my equal by education and mental qualities."

She might have added, "by birth," but she did not care about publishing the fact that she was born Louise Plantin.

"Monsieur de Gravigny has told me about you," she continued.

"You have seen him again?" asked Claudine quickly

"Not since yesterday's scene," replied the marchioness, much astonished at the question, and above all at the tone

which Madame Marly adopted in addressing her. "But he has often told me that you might be one of us, and I assure you that I have never doubted it. This is not the first time that I have seen you. We live in the same house—fortunately—and I have had many opportunities of noticing your beauty, your good style—"

"Excuse me, madame," interrupted Claudine, "I am much touched by your compliments, but I should be much obliged if you would tell me—"

"Why I came? Did I not tell you, or if I did not do so, have you not guessed? I should have been heartless if I had not felt a desire to thank you. If it had not been for you, I should have been ruined."

"Possibly so. But you owe me no thanks."

"You mean doubtless that you did what any other woman would have done under the same circumstances—what I should have done myself. Your modesty makes you try to diminish the merit of your generous conduct, but I appreciate it at its full worth. Your coolness and devotion were admirable, under circumstances when I should probably have lost my head. How terrified you must have been when Monsieur de Gravigny fell on to your balcony!"

"I was afraid—for him," murmured Madame Marly, with a strange smile.

"And I too, for I had time to see him lying there motionless. I could not help him—my husband had just come in—I had recognised his step, and I had to bar the way, so as to prevent him from going to the window."

"You thought of the danger you were in. That was very natural," said Claudine, ironically.

"No, I thought of no one but George. He was without means of defence, and Monsieur de Benserade was armed."

Claudine started. The name of George, which her rival

uttered for the first time in her presence, had cut her to the quick.

"Monsieur de Gravigny was able to get up after his terrible fall?" continued the marchioness.

"No. I lifted him up. He had lost consciousness," said Madame Marly, looking fixedly at her.

"And it was to you that he owed his escape. I knew well that I was under an obligation to you. And I promise you that I shall never forget it."

"You are mistaken, madame. Monsieur Gravigny did not escape."

"What? Impossible! Monsieur de Benserade would have seen him."

"Then your husband did not tell you what happened?" said Claudine.

"He told me that he almost forced his way in here, believing that he should find a man whom he suspected of being my lover, because this man must have jumped from my room window. But he added that he admitted his mistake, and asked my forgiveness for having accused me. He said nothing more."

"Monsieur de Benserade is a gallant man; he is circumspect."

"I don't understand, but yesterday I understood; I understood that you had helped George to escape. And I should not have been a woman if I had not made my husband buy dearly the pardon that he implored."

"Then you are reconciled with him?"

"Oh, completely. He is ashamed of what he did, and has sworn never to be jealous again."

"So that you are hopeful that your acquaintance with Monsieur de Gravigny will not be interfered with again."

"I am certain of it. George and I owe you our peace and happiness."

This was too much. Claudine drew herself up and said, drily :

"Your husband concealed the truth from you. He found Monsieur de Gravigny here."

"And did not kill him? Ah! then you defended him—you threw yourself between him and Monsieur de Benserade, at the risk of being his victim."

"No. Monsieur de Gravigny would not have allowed a woman to risk her life for him."

"Then how did you explain his presence in your rooms?"

"How would you have explained it if you had been in my place?"

"I—I don't know—perhaps I might have had one of those lucky inspirations which occur during the time of the greatest danger, and which occurred to you, no doubt—I should have said—yes, that is the only way—I should have said that Monsieur de Gravigny had come to see me, because—"

"Go on ; because he was your lover."

"Ah, I guessed as much. Then you were not afraid to say that, without thinking of the consequences of your generous falsehood. You must have known that Monsieur de Benserade would not feel bound to keep to himself a confession which, if it came to Monsieur Salers's ears, might cause serious consequences to you. It was heroic! It was sublime! And you do not want me to thank you!" cried the marchioness, holding out her hands to Madame Marly, who drew hers back.

"That which you mention did actually happen," said Claudine coldly. "Monsieur Salers has left me."

"What! had my husband the baseness to betray you to him?"

"Monsieur Salers came in whilst Monsieur de Gravigny and Monsieur de Benserade were confronting one another. Your husband challenged me to repeat before Monsieur

Salers what I had told him. I did so. I said that George was my lover."

Claudine laid a stress on the word "George" which passed unnoticed. The marchioness was all gratitude, and she said with genuine feeling:

"So, out of kindness to me, whom you did not know and could not have loved, you sacrificed a connection which was of the utmost importance to you? How can I ever repay you? By being your friend? Will you let me?"

"I! your friend! you cannot think of it, madame. You owe me nothing. It was not for you that I made the sacrifice."

"For whom, then?"

"You forget that your husband had a revolver in his hand and was threatening George."

"*George!*" repeated the marchioness, stung once more by this word which Claudine threw in her face. "Why do you not say Monsieur de Gravigny?"

"Because I am not accustomed to say 'monsieur' in speaking of a man that I love."

"You love him! you!"

"As I never loved before."

"You are joking, I suppose," said Madame de Benserade, scornfully.

"Don't pretend not to understand me," cried Claudine, beside herself. "To a man whom I have been faithful to for three years I declared that George was my lover. You don't think me mad enough to have lied. I am not a marchioness," continued Claudine; "I'm only a kept woman, a harlot, as you say when you talk of those who are not of your class and who are just as good as you. I don't go in for sentiment, and I know what Monsieur Salers's attachment was worth. If you imagine that I would have left him to get you out of trouble, you are singularly mistaken.

I liked my position, and I would not willingly have left it—not even to satisfy a caprice. Such sacrifices, when one has my years and experience, are only made for the man whom one adores."

"You dare to say that you adore Monsieur de Gravigny!" cried Madame de Benserade; "you did not know him till yesterday. You had never seen him."

"And do you think that love comes with reflection! you think I'm like you and your kind, who deliberate for six months to whom you shall give yourselves! I've received no company. I can't take the pick amongst my partners, calculate the advantages and disadvantages of such and such an one, and calmly decide on the most agreeable and convenient connection. I'm reduced to taking my lovers where I can find them. I've found one to my taste; I've taken him, and I'm going to keep him."

"You took him, I know," said the marchioness, disdainfully. "Monsieur de Gravigny was at your mercy. But you won't keep him."

"You think so?" asked Claudine, with insolent irony. "You ought to have come a little sooner. You would have ound him here, and he would have told you that he should come again this evening."

"You lie."

"Go and ask him whether I lie. I'll allow you, for I can trust him. Look here; do you want proofs? I'm going to dine with him at the Café Anglais. We shall part afterwards, for I promised to go to tea with Caroline Lebarbier, and because he has an appointment at his club. But he'll come to-night. He has a key with which he can come in at any hour."

"The key that Monsieur Salers had, I suppose?" said Madame de Benserade, furious.

"Exactly so. Monsieur Salers sent it back to me early

this morning, and I gave it to George, who will make use of it, since he accepted it."

"You think he is rich, then?" asked the marchioness in her most cutting voice.

"I know nothing about it, but I hope he is not. Oh, you imagine that I think of nothing but money, and that you have the advantage over me in disinterestedness. You fancy, too, that George is indebted to you because you have been unfaithful to a fool for his sake. How he must appreciate the sacrifice! Why, you have sacrificed nothing at all. What did you risk? Separation? But that means liberty. You detest your husband, and you have enough to live on. For my part, I did not detest Monsieur Salers, and I have not twelve thousand francs a year. Now that I have lost him, I ought to retire into some small country town. But I shall stay in Paris, and I shall not ask George for a sou. It's love in a cottage, but what matters that to me, so long as I have George? I love to ruin myself for his sake. Shall I tell you what I long for? It is that he should want money, and ask me for it. I would gladly give him all I have got."

"I should like him to hear you. He would remember that he is a gentleman, and that a gentleman lowers himself in allowing a woman, who talks as you are talking, to love him."

"No heroics! You know now how things stand; I want to know whether you give George up."

"I would die sooner."

"Then it is war?"

"War! with you! Oh, no. You do not exist, so far as I am concerned."

"I shall soon make you see that I exist, for I swear that if you try to take my lover I'll go to your husband and tell him what happened yesterday."

"Go to him!" said the marchioness proudly. "I expected the threat, and it has no terrors for me. I, too, am ready to sacrifice all for George. Let Monsieur de Benserade kill me or drive me away—so much the better! George will know that I love him as you never will, as you never can."

Claudine's face grew pale. She saw that she had underrated her rival. She thought she had to deal with a coquette who had entered into an amour which had no attraction but for her senses and vanity. She saw now that Madame de Benserade was a violent and passionate woman, that she loved as they loved in the sixteenth century, and that she was capable of taking her revenge for an act of treason by killing, "like a man, with her own hands," as Brantôme says in his history of the life of the *dames galantes* of his day.

But she was more determined than ever not to yield George up, and her only fear was for him.

"Set yourself at ease, madame," said she, controlling her excitement, "I shall not do that. I am not used to employ such weapons as that, and George would not care for me if I had recourse to them in order to rid him of you. And besides, your husband would not kill you. He would fight Monsieur de Gravigny, and I will not allow my lover to risk his life against that of the brave man whom you have deceived."

"What shall you do, then?"

"Nothing. I am certain of his love. You hope to get George again. Very good. Try it!"

The marchioness trembled with passion, and things were within an ace of taking a fresh turn, for she was no longer mistress of herself.

Olga entered the room very opportunely to remind the two rivals that some restraint was necessary.

"Madame rang?" she asked, innocently.

She knew that nothing of the kind had happened, for she had been standing behind the door from the beginning of the interview and had heard everything.

"No," said Claudine impatiently. "Leave the room."

"Madame forgets that she has to go out at three o'clock, and that she has not begun to dress," said the artful maid.

This remark had no effect on Madame Marly, but it went straight to the marchioness's heart.

"She's going out!" she thought. "Where can she be going, if not to George? He is waiting for her. Very well, I will be there before her."

And, drawing down the veil which she had lifted on entering the room, she took a step backwards. Claudine had a cruel remark on her tongue, but she restrained it. She had said all that she had to say, and it did not become her to continue the quarrel before her maid.

"Show this lady out," she said to Olga.

The marchioness had also strength enough to control herself. She guessed that she had no time to lose in order to get the start of her rival, and she went out without hurling one of those remarks which women always have at their command to strike an enemy in a vital part. Claudine followed her with her eyes, but she did not move. She was left alone on the field of battle.

"What impertinence!" cried Olga, rushing back into the room. "To come here and insult madame. It's rather too strong!"

"It appears to me you were listening at the door," said Claudine, frowning.

"Madame will forgive me. I thought that marchioness was up to some mischief, and I thought that madame might have to call me."

"You're a fool. These grand ladies don't frighten me.

And I'm pretty sure she won't capture George again. He's had enough of her."

"Madame believes what men say. Madame is wrong."

"Be quiet, and come and dress me."

"Madame will not be home to dinner?"

"You know that well enough, as I have given you leave to go out to-night."

"I am much obliged to madame, and if I dared, I should like to ask—"

"What now?"

"To sleep out. Ernest has had an invitation to a friend's at Montmartre, and he promised to take me to supper, if I could get out. I shall be here to-morrow morning before madame is awake."

"You're going mad after that man."

"Oh, madame, you don't think that. One doesn't do that at my age. I like Ernest, but I don't let him see it. I don't want him to fancy he has me at his feet. That's just the way with true lovers. The more you love them, the more they laugh at you."

"Go and have supper where you like, but spare me your moralizing."

"What I say is for myself. I should not venture to give madame advice. Besides, Monsieur de Gravigny is too well bred to take advantage of madame, who has left Monsieur Salers for his sake. Monsieur de Gravigny has no money, it appears, but money doesn't make happiness, and he won't object to madame making a good bargain with someone else."

"Enough!" said Madame Marly, imperiously. "If you don't mind your own business I'll dismiss you."

Olga was silent, but she thought not the less. She thought:

"This fine fellow will cost madame dear. She'll have the bailiffs in before six months are over."

IV.

It was nearly ten o'clock, and Madame Marly had finished her dinner with George at the Café Anglais. A real honeymoon dinner, seasoned with those childish love passages which have such an attraction for young lovers. Claudine had drunk the whole time from George's glass, and had even taken his cigarettes out of his mouth to finish them in hers.

George was delighted at being adored. The Marchioness de Benserade and other fine ladies had spoilt him, but Claudine pleased him by her novel and unspeakable forms of tenderness. She was so gay, so frank, so good-natured. She had so unhesitatingly dismissed Paul Salers for his sake! This trait worthy of Manon Lescaut charmed him. And then, this evening he was in high spirits. He had a woman the less on his hands and four thousand francs in his pocket; a woman who had begun to grow stale, and four thousand francs which were going to multiply exceedingly.

His scruples of the morning had vanished. Remorse had given place to hope. He thought of nothing but, by bold play, of breaking the Russian prince's bank, and he prepared himself for the battle by letting himself be loved.

"Is it true that you have left her altogether?" asked Claudine, looking at him as women know how to look when they wish to read in their lover's eyes.

"Clean broken it off, my darling," said George gaily 'I've burnt my ships. I was almost rude. And I can answer for it that there's no reconciliation possible now. She's too proud to seek it."

"But you—"

"I? I'm taken possession of by a charming girl who'll stick to me, and whom I've not the least wish to leave."

The answer was paid for in ready money, paid in kisses boisterously given.

"She had the audacity to come and see you, knowing that you were my lover, for I can assure you I told her. I should like to have cried it on the house tops. Oh, these society ladies! they've got no hearts."

"She has too much. She'll come to grief."

"Well, what did she do? Tell me all about it. I want to know."

"It's very simple. There were neither words nor tears. I had just come home, and I had laid down on the sofa for a nap, when I heard her ring. I suspected that the explanation would be a strong one, and I was agreeably surprised to find that you had prepared her. She said, 'I have just come from that creature's.' You see I'm not smoothing anything down."

"I seem to hear it all."

"I replied: 'Then I have nothing to tell you.' She went white, but she didn't scold. She had even the good taste not to speak of the sacrifices she had made for me."

"What sacrifices? She has lost nothing. She has got her husband."

"Whilst you, my little Clo-Clo, have thrown your bread-winner overboard. I might have pointed out the difference to her, but that would have been cruel. Besides, she saw it. She asked me whether I was determined to remain with you; she gave me to understand that she looked upon last night's adventure as a momentary folly, and any new attachment a caprice which would not last. I believe even that she insinuated that you did not care much about making it permanent, and that the acquaintance would soon drop."

"She knew otherwise, though. I didn't spare her. I told her that I would sooner be your servant than give you up."

"I don't know whether she had any hopes, but I'll swear she has none now. I didn't leave her one. I'm forced to admit that she went through it well. Anyone else would have wept, implored—"

"I should have gone down on my knees to you."

"She would have liked to, possibly," said George, with naïve fatuity, "but, you know, the habit they have of controlling themselves—marchionesses are not demonstrative—and she has any amount of pride and an iron will—she had death in her soul, and yet she had the courage to say to me: 'Very well. We shall never see one another again. I hate you as much as I have loved you.' She even added: 'I will be revenged.'"

"And not a word of regret, not a sign of emotion?"

"Only one; as I was ceremoniously showing her out, she turned round suddenly, and said in a tone which you can imagine:

"'George, if I were to forgive you?'"

"Well?"

"Then I made her a bow and said: 'Madame, I am unpardonable.'"

"Now I'm sure you love me," cried Claudine, throwing her arms round George's neck. "You did it in style. I should like to have been there."

"It was no treat, I can assure you. She went away furious, and I have an enemy the more now."

"You despise her, I should hope."

"Not so."

"What do you fear from her?"

"She can do me a good deal of harm, and she'll do it. She'll run me down, she'll spread false reports about me

It'll ruin me to be accused of certain things—of living on women, for instance."

"You! but people who said such things—"

"Would not say them long, if I knew who they were. I should have a sword ready for them. But they won't say them before me or my friends, and the calumny will spread. I tell you, Claudine, that that woman is capable of anything. You would find that out to your cost, if she was in a position to do you an injury; but as she can do nothing to harm you, she'll take revenge on your lover."

"I should advise her not to touch him. I'd tell her husband the truth about her. No, that would do no good, but I'd insult her in the street, I'd—"

"Say at once that you'd throw vitriol in her face," interrupted Monsieur de Gravigny, laughing. "I object. I've no wish to appear at the assizes as the principal witness. Fancy me being bullied by the judge for being the hero of a love drama. The papers would work it up nicely, and I should be the laughing-stock of Paris."

"You are right. This crack-brained marchioness doesn't deserve that I should trouble myself about her. I hope she'll go and get over it in the country. That's her proper sphere. She was born to amuse the spare time of garrison officers. I wonder how you could ever love her, for you did love her—!"

"Oh, a little."

"Don't tell stories. You must have been fond of her, as you risked your life for the pleasure of going to see her. Her gendarme of a husband would have killed you if he had caught you."

"It was just the charm of danger which attracted me. I enjoyed duping the country gentleman in his own house. As for his wife, if I told you I didn't care for her, you wouldn't believe it. I admit there was something about her

that I liked, some touch of the streets. She's a strange creature. But my heart wasn't in it, and the proof of it is that she asked me twenty times to go off with her and I always refused."

"I believe you, and it does me good to believe you," murmured Madame Marly, who had become pensive.

"Oh, if I had loved her—"

"If you had loved her, and then left her as you did, I shouldn't hope to keep you long."

"Oh, you, my darling Claudine; that's quite a different thing."

"I don't see the difference."

"It's plain enough. The marchioness lost nothing in taking me for her lover. I was under no obligation to her, and I am to you."

"Because I gave up the man who kept me? You might think well of me for it, if I was poor. But I am rich, my George."

"Really?"

"I am independent for life. I want nothing now. You don't believe me, perhaps? You think I'm concealing my true position from you, in order to spare your feelings of delicacy. Well, I'll undeceive you. To-morrow morning I'll show you certificates of stock in the Funds, and other documents, which give me an income which amply suffices me. Listen. Before coming here I went to my brokers to get some dividends, and I've six notes of a thousand each in my purse. Would you like to see them?"

"Thanks! not at all. Only you have taken a heavy load off my mind. I was wondering how you would manage to remain my mistress. I may tell you now that I have no fortune of any kind. I had one, but I squandered it. Perhaps you have heard of my uncle, who has three hundred thousand francs a year, but we quarrelled seriously,

and he won't leave me a sou. Now you know all about me."

"I knew it all before," said Claudine, "and I swear I would not have had you if you had been rich. Would you like to know why?

"If you were rich," continued Claudine, in tones warm and sweet as music, "I could not love you, for you would be a stranger. I've lived on rich men ever since I left my husband, who used to beat me. I know them. A woman is only their plaything. They give her more or less money, in proportion as she pleases them more or less, or more or less flatters their vanity. They let her go when she has ceased to be a novelty, and go and provide for themselves elsewhere. They call that renewing their stable. Do you think I'm exaggerating?"

"Certainly not," said George, laughing. "I had money once, I was what they called a solid man—note that I was eight years younger—and I used not to stand on ceremony with the women I paid. It's true they repaid me well, but that was a matter of indifference to me."

"Then you can understand me. If I had come across you in those days, you would possible have done me the honour of choosing me; now you would not have a word for me, and I should probably not remember anything about you, no more than I remember the Moldavian who bought me my first furniture. You would have been my master, never my lover. I call my lover the man who loves me and whom I love. Paul Salers I liked well enough. If I had known him under other conditions, perhaps I should have fallen in love with him. And you saw how I left him."

"I'll do you the justice to say that you didn't hesitate a moment. And, to prove the truth of your statement about rich men, I noticed that he was soon resigned to the separation."

"Not so much as you think," said Claudine quickly; "he has plenty of pride, and he couldn't do otherwise than withdraw. But I can assure you that if I wanted—"

"Oh, but you won't want," interrupted George, in order to soothe Madame Marly, who was touched to the quick.

Women will not allow that men can console themselves for their loss, and Paul Salers's behaviour had disagreeably surprised Claudine. She did not like to be reminded of it.

"I!" she cried, "I go back to that creature! I should prefer to knit stockings for my livelihood. Luckily I can do without him, I can do without everyone—except you."

"You are a darling, my little Claudine, and I know you're in earnest. But listen; I repeat that I haven't got a sou at present, and have nothing to hope for in the future. But that doesn't worry me. I've managed to get along somehow or other till now; I shall continue to do so, and, at the worst, I can always go out in search of adventures in Australia, California, or somewhere else. That's the last resource of broken-down men, and never fails them. People discover mines and pierce isthmuses on purpose for them. But there is a kind of devotion that a gentleman cannot accept. I can't allow you to be put to straits for the pleasure of being mine alone. I should feel remorse, and later on, perhaps, you would regret it."

"Is that a pretext for refusing what I ask?" asked Madame Marly in tears.

"Not at all. I confide to you my scruples, and at the same time express a fear. I will not run the chance of you reproaching me some day of—"

"Of causing me to lose my position. Rest easy. If ever I ceased to care for you, I should not be foolish enough to complain. It has happened to me to have to play the recriminating game, but I played it from an interested motive, in order to give myself a kind of value with some Paul Salers

or other, by boasting of the generosity of his predecessor. But I should blush to have recourse to it with you. And, to remove your scruples, my George," continued Claudine, who was herself again, "I'm going to talk seriously to you. Listen to me, and you'll know that I'm more reasonable than you think. To begin with, if I had been about to be forced to give music lessons, I should not have had the courage to give up the luxurious life which Monsieur Salers allowed me to live. But I have about two hundred and forty thousand francs. I'm not counting either my furniture or my jewellery. That is the capital of twelve thousand francs a year. With an income like that, a woman can't cut a great figure, but she can live very comfortably. There are people who live on less and cut a very decent figure."

"Yes, but not in your class. Just remember that an income of twelve thousand francs means a little suite of rooms at twelve hundred francs, modest dresses, and plain fare. You'd have to be economical with your washing. You wouldn't have a maid, you'd have to put up with a slavey. What will your friends say: Caroline, Armande, Adèle—?"

"They will say what they like, or rather they will not say anything, for I sha'n't see them again."

"What! you'd go the length of changing your friends?"

"I shall not change them. I shall not have any."

"You want to shut yourself up, then? Why not go into a convent at once?"

"Because if I went into a convent I should not be able to see my little George. Don't laugh, and let me tell you what my dream is. I shall move in April. I shall send my furniture to the *Hôtel Drouot*, and I think it'll sell well. My name will bring buyers. They'll say I'm ruined. I shall let them say so, and I shall spread a report myself that I'm going to live in the country. Not a word about you, my darling."

"But your secret will be like Polichinelle's. Within a week from now all Paris will know that I'm your lover. If it was only for Monsieur Salers spreading it about—!"

"He'll say that he left me because he found you with me, but no one will know anything more."

"And your maid? Do you think she'll keep her tongue still?"

"Olga? I shall dismiss her. She was useful to me in the Rue de l'Arcade, but she would be too expensive in my little new home, and, besides, she would be in my way."

"Then you'll make an enemy of her, and as she will go into another lady's service, she'll have some nice stories to tell about us."

"I don't care about that, because I'm certain that none will bother themselves about us, at the end of six months. In Paris it is much easier to get one's self forgotten, than to get one's self talked about, and as I shall be seen no more at the theatres, nor in the Bois, nor anywhere with you—"

"What! not go out together?"

"Yes; but as you used to go out with your marchioness. I shall wear dark veils; when we go to the theatre we'll take a box and raise the screens. You've always had aristocratic ladies, people will think that you have kept up the habit."

"A good idea, and so long as it amuses you—"

"Wait, I haven't done. I shall go and live not very far from you—but not too near, either. I don't want you to think that I keep a watch on you. We can see one another when you like, and not more often."

"Why, it will be paradise, and really I don't deserve to enter it. You've only known me for four-and-twenty hours, and I haven't shown you my defects yet. You don't know, my poor girl, that I pass my nights losing money at the club, and my days running in and out of the money-lenders'?"

"As long as there is time left for you to love me, I shall ask nothing more and shall be content—you found plenty of time to love Madame de Benserade."

"In winter, yes. And again, remember that she had a husband, and was hardly ever at liberty when she was in Paris, and she passed six months of the twelve in Normandy."

"I've neither country house nor husband, but I promise you, George, that I'll never intrude on your time. When you call me, I'll come; when you come, I'll be there, but you shall be free."

'Then you're not afraid of me abusing my liberty?" asked George, with a smile.

"I'm afraid of your leaving me, and I know that you would leave me if I were too exacting," replied Claudine, with such an accent of impassioned earnestness, that her lover caught the enthusiasm.

"You are the best and most charming of women," said he, taking both her hands in his.

"Then you consent?" cried Claudine. "You will let me be yours, no one's but yours. Listen, George. I don't know what will be the end of it. You may get tired of me; I may grow plain; I may die to-morrow—but you have given me enough happiness.

"Listen again. I swear that I have no selfish object. I'm not thinking of monopolising you, still less of marrying you. I know that George de Gravigny can only bestow his name on a woman who is worthy of him. And would you like to know how far my love goes? If you came one day and told me that you had an opportunity of bettering yourself by marriage—well, I believe I should have the courage to sacrifice myself. It would only be a case of losing my life," she added, in a voice which gave the Count de Gravigny's seductive nephew food for reflection.

"Not a word more," he said gaily; "you'll end by

frightening me so much that I shall refuse to conclude the bargain."

"It's too late to draw back, sir," said Claudine, laughing as happy women laugh. "You have accepted, and a gentleman can only give his word once. It is as if the contract were signed."

"Certainly," cried George. "I've no wish to back out. You've got a way of drawing such a fascinating picture of our life! It makes the water come into my mouth. I've never had a mistress to equal you, and now you offer, in addition, to be the most devoted of friends. Do you know you would make me quite conceited, if I were that way inclined. Tell me, Claudinette, what have I done to make you like me so much?"

"Look at yourself in the glass, great stupid," replied Claudine, taking the viscount's charming face in both her hands. "You're the handsomest fellow I ever saw. Hark! When I was a youngster I used to read 'The Three Musketeers' on the sly, and dream of D'Artagnan. Well, you are just such as I fancied him."

"Excuse me, madame," said George with comic gravity; "if my memory is correct, D'Artagnan was dark. Do I look like a—like a Gascon?"

"You look like what I love, and you are the loveliest of fair men. You're like Athos."

"Another musketeer; but I prefer him. And now, my dear girl, I won't conceal from you that your explanation is insufficient. Since the time when you first began looking about, you must have seen plenty of gentlemen with moustaches as long as mine, and I suppose you didn't go mad over them; if so, you wouldn't have twelve thousand francs a year. Why did you choose me?"

"Can anyone say why they love? If they did, they wouldn't love. Love, my darling George, is like faith. It comes or comes not."

"What you say is all very well, but I don't believe it. You women are always poetical, and you are right. It doesn't prevent you, all the same, from keeping your senses about you. I should like to bet that, if you're honest, you'll admit that I took your fancy by chance, because I wore a pair of trousers that suited me, or because it was a Sunday, or because you were nervous yesterday."

"You think you're talking nonsense, George. Well, you've almost guessed the truth. You are too clever for me to try and impose on you. I liked you at first because I knew you in a different way from anyone else."

"The fact is, I suppose, that no one had ever entered your room by the window."

"That's to say, that one had only to ring at my door to be let in. You're a cheeky fellow, George, but I can't be angry with you. I must confess, though, that you are somewhere near the truth. But listen. Our life is so stupid and monotonous. There's so little fresh about it. I went to Monsieur Salers just as the daughter of a confectioner marries the son of a wine merchant. References were given and required. And when we came to terms we ordered the wedding breakfast at the Café Riche. Whilst with you—"

"Oh, that's quite different. I burst in upon you, like the Prussian shells fell on the roofs during the siege."

"Yes, that was so, and then—"

"—And then, what?"

"The danger."

"Quite so. You might have been surprised by Monsieur Salers, and you were—"

"I did not think of myself."

"Of whom, then?"

"Of you, who had just risked your life in order not to compromise a woman."

"Oh, my life! I was pretty certain of not missing the balcony. I learnt gymnastics at college."

"Be quiet," said Claudine, closing his mouth with her lips. "It was a miracle you weren't killed. The fall was enough to make you lose consciousness. And as I've stated my weaknesses, would you like to know all? Well, when I saw you lying on that stone, where you might have smashed your skull, it went straight to my heart. You were as pale as death, and so handsome—"

"So if I'd broken my nose or knocked an eye out in falling, you'd have sent for a policeman to pick me up. I'm not sorry to learn that fainting-fits become me. In future I shall arrange to always have two or three swoons at my disposal."

"George, you're too bad. One can't talk seriously to you."

"I've told you I'm not serious."

"You'll make me lose my temper, and, as I don't want to do that, I'm off."

"Where to?"

"To Caro's. You know that well enough. She expects me at ten, and it will be twelve when I get there. Ask for the bill and let's go. Are you going to the club?"

"Yes. I want to play cards to-night—in spite of the proverb."

"You admit then that you are lucky in love?" asked Claudine, beaming.

"So lucky that I'm horribly afraid of being unlucky at baccarat."

"You're superstitious, so am I. Do you know that last year a somnambulist told me to beware of windows? Wasn't she right, eh? Love came in by one. And I who was thinking that it was an accident! You must take predictions and proverbs by contraries. I adore you, and you'll win to-night."

"So be it! and the more so, that there will be some high play."

"Really! They told me all the punters were disheartened."

"'*They*' was Monsieur Salers, wasn't it, eh? Oh, there's no need to blush. I'm not jealous of the past. Well, but he's wrong. Someone has come on the scene who plays any stakes. Prince Lounine—you know him, I think?"

"Yes," said Madame Marly, brusquely, "and if you managed to ruin him I should be more pleased than if someone had left us a million. But it's fearfully hot here. Have you rung?"

'No, but I'll do so."

"Will you take me to Caroline's?"

"Certainly, if you like."

"You're certain I'm going there, aren't you?"

"Why, surely we haven't got already to making up stories to deceive one another. I might just as well ask you if you believed I was going to the club."

"Well, then, don't come with me. I don't want you to miss the first game against that brute of a Lounine. And you can stop as long as you like—till to-morrow, if you please. You've got your slave's key. She will await you, and you will find her alone. She has dismissed her attendants for to-night."

"Ah! the faithful Olga has leave to sleep out?"

"If I had refused it, I think she would have taken it. Didn't I tell you she had a lover, a youth who is one of the lions at the Bal de la Reine Blanche?"

"The devil! She must cost you something. I think you would do better not to keep her when you come and live near my Rue Neuve des Mathurins. Aren't you afraid of being left alone at night?"

"I should be, if you weren't coming; but you are, aren't you?"

"I promise you. May Lounine throw nine every time, if I don't keep my word."

"You'll throw it, darling, and beat him. I should like to be there; I detest him. But, *à propos* of baccarat, you know they play at Caro's—and not for counters, but a real game. That lucky Armande won a hundred and sixty louis last Monday."

"Mind you don't lose twice that, you who are going to settle down; it would be a bad beginning."

"Oh, I'll be good; but I'd just as soon not be tempted. I say, George, you might put my six thousand-franc notes in your pocket."

"Never! I might do so if I wasn't going to the club; but when I play cards I don't care about having money on me that doesn't belong to me. I think I'm sure enough of myself not to touch it, but one never knows what may happen. Your money might fly out on the table of its own accord."

"There would be no great harm done. You could pay me back later on, whilst if I lose them at Caroline's I shall never see them again. Take them, George."

"No, a thousand times, no."

"If you refuse to put them in safety in your pocket-book, I shall think you despise me, that you take me for—"

Claudine, as she spoke, had taken possession of George's hand, and was thrusting into it the rustling notes of the Bank of France. At that moment the waiter came into the room, and George, in order that the latter should not see what was going on, was forced to close his fingers.

Claudine, delighted at the success of her manœuvre, rose quickly, under pretence of putting her hat on. She laughed heartily, whilst George, who was rather annoyed, was ordering a cab; and as the waiter had brought the bill, he had to pay it without showing the notes.

"There is a cab at the door," said the waiter, waiting to take the money for the bill.

George decided to put the notes in his coat pocket, and took out his purse to settle the bill, which was not a trifling one. It just happened that a hundred-franc note sufficed, tip included, so that the waiter had no change to bring back. Claudine, who had read the amount, did not lose the opportunity of forcing her lover's hand. Her hat was on her pretty head, which it became to a marvel. She threw on without help her fur mantle and ran quickly out into the corridor.

Pestered by the assiduities of the waiter, who insisted on putting on his overcoat, George only overtook her on the stairs, and at the moment when he placed his foot on the top step he found himself almost face to face with another couple, who emerged from another corridor. His surprise was not small in recognising Monsieur de Benserade and his wife.

The marquis had evidently been doing justice to the wines of the Café Anglais, for his face was as red as a cock's comb. He was beaming, and the marchioness appeared no less satisfied. Her veil was raised, her eyes were sparkling. She tossed her head, she strutted. She had all the appearance of a woman who wishes to draw attention on herself. And, as a matter of fact, the head waiter of the Café Anglais had taken her for a lady of the *demi-monde*. Parisian society he had at his fingers' ends, but Monsieur de Benserade was not a regular customer. He could have said with the Doge of Venice, at Versailless, "That which astonishes me most here, is to see myself here."

He started on seeing George de Gravigny, whose face he had not forgotten, and he knitted his brows; but Claudine was not far off, and she took good care to turn round. The marquis saw that she had been dining with George, and his face relaxed again. Chance had proved to him that this

"irregular" had not lied the day before in declaring that she was the charming viscount's lover, and if the happy husband had preserved any doubt, this meeting would have dispelled it. He was very nearly taking off his hat to his wife's late lover.

Very different was the effect produced on Madame de Benserade. She was furious to discover George with her rival, and delighted at the same time to show him that the marquis took her into a private room, as if he had been her lover.

Gravigny, who never lost his head, had politely drawn back to make way for them. She passed, darting at him a triumphant and venomous glance. Her husband followed her without looking aside, and George went downstairs behind them.

He was anxious to overtake Claudine, in order to give her back the notes, and he expected to find her below. He was even afraid that she would not be able to resist laughing in the marchioness's face. But Claudine was already in the cab, and the porter was holding the door open.

George, congratulating himself on having escaped a scene, went out quickly, and saw Monsieur de Benserade and his wife going arm and arm down the Rue Marivaux, towards the Boulevard.

Now or never was the time to get rid of the six thousand francs, which weighed on his mind. He took them from his pocket, went up to the cab into which Madame Marly had just stepped, and leaning against the door, which the porter had just shut, he put his head inside. He thought that Claudine would say: "*Au revoir*," with one of those expressive pressures of the hand which women keep for their favourite ones; but instead of a handshake she gave him a kiss. The two dainty hands remained in the muff, and her lips, on meeting his, murmured their malicious adieu:

"Don't forget, I shall expect you, and don't follow your marchioness. She has her husband to comfort her. I've only got you."

"Your money!" cried George.

"Take care, darling, you'll be run over," replied Madame Marly, laughing.

She had had time to give the driver her friend's address, and the cab, which was a private one—a private cab, such as are found at the doors of fashionable restaurants—and was furnished with an excellent horse, was already moving off.

Gravigny had just time to draw back, in order not to be caught by the wheel. He thought for a moment of throwing the notes in at the window, but it was not easy to take good aim, and if he had missed, he would have had to pick them up out of the gutter. He did not care to make himself ridiculous before the passers-by.

"Deuce take her," he muttered, putting the notes in his pocket-book. "Did anyone ever hear of such folly! To force a man who is going to play cards to take charge of money that doesn't belong to him. It's stupid, it's idiotic, it's anything one likes—unless it was done with a purpose. Ha! Ha! that artful Claudine is quite capable of inventing a dodge like that, to bind me to her. The little wretch must have thought to herself that if I'm broke to-night I sha'n't be able to resist the temptation of making use of her money, and that if I lose it, after having lost my own, I remain her debtor and her lover. She would have me safe. But I'll show her that she's mistaken. For Prince Lounine's whole fortune I wouldn't touch the six thousand francs that she's left with me in spite of myself. Have a common purse with my mistress! No, no, my little dear, I haven't got to that yet."

He forgot, did this stupid viscount, that that very morning, on coming out of the Café Bignon, and before meeting

Daubrac, that he had thought of borrowing three hundred louis of this same Claudine whose debtor he would no longer be, now that he was in funds. He forgot that his delicacy depended principally on the state of his finances, and that the trick which had been played by Daubrac on his uncle was very far beyond the bounds permissible to good-for-nothing nephews under the circumstances. But the sentiment which Beaumarchais has put in Brid'oison's mouth is always true: "There are certain truths that one prefers not to say even to one's self."

Having become resigned to be Madame Marly's cashier for a few hours, and resolved to be a faithful one, George made his way towards his club, thinking, meanwhile, of something else.

And firstly of his new connection. It suited him well enough, because he did not attach any great importance to it, and because he would only look on the bright side of it. He had begun to be tired of society amours, and to appreciate accommodating mistresses. To risk a duel or a conflict with the law, for the pleasure of duping a husband, began, at last, to lose its charm. Less perilous, and more pleasant, was a relation with a pretty woman who voluntarily offered to retire from public life in order to be wholly his. And this devotion on the part of one converted through love was acceptable, since Claudine had enough money to live on. There was no question of them living together in a student's garret. Still less of dividing with a harlot ill-gotten gains. It was simply trying the experiment of living a quiet life, and of letting an amorous courtesan indulge a whim of her own, for his benefit. The prospect had in it nothing repulsive, nothing dishonourable. And at the same time it flattered his vanity to reflect that he had only had to appear on the scene in order to make the conquest of a woman who was a connoisseur in lovers. So George had made

up his mind to make a trial of this new existence, and he did not regret the marchioness. It only occurred to him that she had made up her mind to the rupture very quickly.

"To go and dine *tête-à-tête* the same evening with a husband whom she would have left ten times over if I had wished it, is a little strong," he thought to himself as he walked along the boulevard which led to his club. "I'll bet she chose, on purpose, the room where we've dined together twenty times, and that she was delighted to make Monsieur de Benserade sit in the same place as she used to make me sit. If the mirrors had only preserved the imprint of the scenes they've reflected, that gentleman would have seen some nice sights. She must have been thinking about that all the time, and enjoying her double revenge. There's no one in the world like her for inventing suchlike refinements. It's to be hoped she won't invent any other, though. If she could find out some means of doing Claudine a bad turn, she wouldn't deprive herself of the consolation. But, fortunately, she can't. Claudine doesn't care a rap for scandal, now she's got rid of her man. Besides, she's going to move, and the marchioness will be going to Normandy directly."

This silent monologue lasted until Gravigny, who was walking towards the Madeleine, had arrived at the Avenue de l'Opéra. The boulevards were showing signs of the approach of New Year's Day. The stalls were already displaying their cheap goods, the confectioners' shops were full to overflowing, and the promenaders, imprisoned by the crowd, were forced to push their way. George, annoyed at not being able to get along, thought that it would be easier to do so on the other side of the road, and he crossed over, so as to land opposite the Café de la Paix. There, indeed, there were fewer loiterers and fewer shops. He lit a cigar, and was able to continue his reflections without being jostled

at every step. But he had not gone a hundred paces before he saw walking just in front of him the Marquis and Marchioness de Benserade. The happy couple were walking slowly along, like lovers, clinging affectionately to one another, and appearing to be exchanging tender confidences.

No one, assuredly, would have taken them for what they were. Husbands have a way of giving their wives an arm which informs passers-by who are endowed with a little common sense of their relation towards one another. They have an air of accomplishing a duty, almost a sacrifice. The lady looks like a resigned victim. One feels that both of them would be happier if they were alone. The chain which weighs on them is not seen, but one can guess it is there. Seasoned Parisians never mistake these signs.

And yet there was no doubt that it was Louise de Benserade whose high-heeled boots were tripping along the asphalte, whilst she chatted gaily with the marquis.

"She does come it strong," said George to himself, astonished and almost annoyed. "She has learnt to put on the airs of a *grisette* who has captured some gallant officer. One would think she was quite proud of clinging to the arm of the husband she detests. But I should like to know why she prolongs this comedy. It's not for my benefit, for she doesn't know I'm looking at her. She must have some dark design against the marquis. If I who know her were in his place, I shouldn't feel very comfortable. Now she's dragging him to look at a stall. She's going to get him to buy her some toys. It's too rich."

The couple, in fact, had halted in front of an extemporised stall, and Madame de Benserade, bursting with laughter, was bargaining for wool sheep, boxes full of wooden trees, and painted horses—a whole assortment of cheap toys.

"Whom the deuce does she want them for?" wondered the viscount. "For the porter's children, I suppose, unless it's a roundabout way of informing her husband that she's going to present him shortly with an heir."

He remembered that, the year before, they had "done" the fair together, she closely veiled and hooded, he up to the ears in a fur cloak. She amused herself like a mad creature—tripping amongst the snow—in examining the imitation china cups and lacquer tables, puzzles, false jewellery, and images. At that time she was far from thinking of charming her lord and master, who had left her the day before to go and superintend a grand boar-hunt in his forest of Vexin.

Times had changed, and the marchioness was repeating with her husband the pleasant excursion which she had undertaken with her lover the year before. The popular diversions had always amused her, but Monsieur de Benserade did not appear to have much taste for them. He smiled, out of complaisance, at the stallkeeper's small-talk, and allowed himself to be loaded with heterogeneous articles; but it was plainly to be seen that he was longing to have done with these childish purchases.

"I can't think what she's driving at," said George, whom his late mistress's freaks annoyed rather more than he would admit to himself. "Probably at awakening the slumbering passions of the good marquis. But with what object? Why, so that he sha'n't be suspicious again when she has found a successor to me, of course! And she won't be long doing that. 'This noble lady is full of precipices,' as Hugo's *Ruy Blas* says, in speaking of Savoy and her duke. I was quite right to leave her, and I swear that she won't get hold of me again."

However, going from stall to stall, the couple whom he was watching from a distance arrived at the Madeleine. With-

out knowing exactly why, George had not ceased to follow them. It was all on his way, however, for his club was close by, and he determined to see the end of it, in order to make certain that these ill-matched turtle-doves returned together to their nest.

His curiosity was satisfied. He saw them pass the church, traverse the esplanade planted with trees which skirts it, go down the Rue de l'Arcade, and finally enter their house.

"If dear Louise only knew that I should be her neighbour to-night, I think it would damp her joy," muttered the viscount, who had taken his stand on the pavement on the opposite side of the street. "It's not improbable that she suspects something of the kind, for I saw her look up as if to see whether there was a light in Madame Marly's."

Mechanically he too looked up and noticed, as he had expected, that the first-floor windows were not lighted up. One of those, however, which looked out on the balcony was open, not wide, but sufficiently so for anyone to see from below that it was not shut.

"That's how Miss Olga does her work," thought George, "Claudine is quite right to send her away. I'd bet that the young lady brings her handsome partner from the Bal de la Reine Blanche home with her when her mistress isn't there. And goodness knows what a rascal of that description is capable of. One fine night he'll murder the mistress, or at any rate rob her. I must warn Claudine."

Moralising thus, George did not leave his post, which was an excellent one for observation. He remained there because he felt impelled by some strange feeling of curiosity. He wanted to know what would happen on the second floor. He knew each room, and it was sufficient, for the purpose of satisfying him, to observe which were lighted. The drawing-room was in the middle, as with Madame Marly, between

the marchioness's bedroom on the left and that of the marquis on the right.

George, after a wait of five minutes, saw a light in Madame Benserade's room. Not the least glimmer in that of the Marquis, or the drawing-room. He waited a quarter of an hour longer, without any alteration taking place in this partial illumination. "Good!" he thought, "I was right; the reconciliation is complete. I have brought about, without wishing it, a perfect understanding between this couple whom seven years have allowed to grow cool. The marquis owes to me a revival of conjugal happiness, he positively owes it to me, for if I hadn't been his wife's lover, she wouldn't trouble herself to be agreeable to him. She hasn't taken long to tame the bear; just now he was holding out his paw to shake hands, like a spaniel. These things are always funny."

He tried to laugh, but at heart he had no wish to do so. That single light was a sign of reconciliation. It worried him. He thought it indecent.

"At any rate," he said to himself, "I'm playing a fool's game here, and if any of my friends surprised me contemplating this house, the story would be all over Paris to-morrow, and everyone would be laughing at me, the marchioness first of all. Let her load her marquis with sordid embraces, it's all the same to me, and I'm off."

With this remark he turned round and walked away, without hurrying himself and without turning round, towards his club.

"There's certainly nothing like a good cigar," he muttered, enjoying the scent of the one he had just lit. "It doesn't last so long as a friendship with a woman; it never deceives one, and when one's finished, a man can begin another with fresh pleasure, whilst with women—*sacrebleu!* look out!"

"Hallo! it's you!" cried the gentleman against whom

George had run, as he turned too sharply the corner of the Rue de l'Arcade.

"Hallo, Daubrac! I wish I may never hold another nine if I expected to find you in these solitudes. Where are you going?"

"To bed."

"Then I sha'n't see you at the club?"

"No, since you're 'going for' the Russian to-night."

"Well?"

"You forget, my dear friend, that we've got to go out together. Salers will probably be at the club, and he's certain not to have omitted to tell all about this morning's scene. If we were in the card-room together, people would do nothing but stare at us, and that would spoil the punting. Now, I'm your partner, and I want you to be in possession of all your coolness, for I'm reckoning on a big success. It won't prevent us from fighting to-morrow for the gallery. But you seem to me to be wanting in zeal. You ought to be there at play now; they'll begin without you, all the places will be taken, and you wouldn't be able to take a hand, which would be deplorable. Where are you coming from, so late?"

"You're very inquisitive."

"Ha, ha! you were coming out of the Rue de l'Arcade, and you were asking this morning about Claudine Marly. Is it possible that—?"

"You're a nuisance—Good-night!" said George, turning his back on his partner.

Daubrac did not follow him, but called out:

"If you've taken up your quarters with her, we're done, my dear fellow. Your uncle's four thousand francs will go to Russia. I told you before, Claudine brings ill-luck."

George was superstitious, as are all gamblers, and this

warning struck him, but he took no heed of it and went his way.

George would have done better to retrace his steps, and go to his new mistress's. But it was fated that that December night should leave its mark on his life.

V.

The club where Prince Lomine was to play against all comers was not one of the most aristocratic in Paris. Men were admitted there who would have been mercilessly blackballed at the Union or Jockey Clubs; but it was nevertheless not one of those which one can walk into as into a café, and which are kept by a man who is really nothing but a *croupier* in disguise. There was a committee, and in order to be a member, it was necessary to have a certain amount of respectability.

George Gravigny was one of these. It was not known that he had either money or land; he lived from hand to mouth, and it was notorious that he had debts. But his shortcomings had never passed that limit which a man cannot overstep without disqualifying himself.

Accordingly he had been admitted a member without any difficulty, and although he had more than once been perilously near a final smash, he had never yet been posted as a defaulter. Play was always high, and a good deal of money was needed to take part in it; but George, who rarely had any, made up for the lack by his boldness and *sang-froid*. His nerve was admirable. Rash when he was winning, he knew where to draw the line when losing, and it had often happened to him to break a bank in a very few minutes.

For the last month he had been very unlucky; he had had to fight an unequal battle with players much richer than himself, and had invariably lost it, victory always favouring

those who are able to renew their stock of ammunition. His own was exhausted, and he had been forced, much against his will, to renounce the combat, and almost all the small punters had done likewise, for the same reason. Capitalists, members of all the clubs, had carried off all their money and had not put in appearance since. Consequently, the prince, who had been announced to come for the last few days, was eagerly expected. He was reckoned on to give a fillip to the proceedings, which had been growing rather tame.

When George entered the large room where the loungers gathered together about midnight, his first care was to inquire if the Russian had arrived. He learnt to his joy that that gentleman was coming at one o'clock, for he was anxious to get a good place at the baccarat table, and was afraid that he had lingered too long, following the marchioness and gazing at her windows. He reproached himself now for this momentary weakness, and the short conversation which he had had with Daubrac at the corner of the Rue de l'Arcade had brought him to his senses again. He thought no more of Madame de Benserade or Madame Marly. He thought only of attacking the Russian.

Before entering the club he had placed, by themselves, at the bottom of his purse, Claudine's six thousand francs, and had afterwards gone to the club cashier, and exchanged his uncle's four thousand for counters. Thus prepared for the great struggle, he had nothing to do but to kill time until it began, and he went up to a group which had collected in front of the fire. It comprised all the talkers and idlers in the club, those who only came there to relate and to listen to the news of the day, collected in every circle of Parisian society, and given off quite fresh. They met there regularly every night after the theatre, and amongst the news which they brought in was frequently something interesting.

Gravigny, who talked little and played much, joined them but seldom, and hardly ever contributed his quota of scandal.

This evening, the conversation appeared to be more animated than usual. Talk waxed fast and furious, and laughter resounded. George knew that he did not furnish the topic, for they saw him coming, and the conversation did not flag, as always happens when he who is being talked about makes his appearance. And yet the first words that he heard caused him to prick up his ears.

"Isn't Paul Salers here?" said a tall young fellow, whose speciality was anecdotes of the frail fair.

"No," replied a speculator who had extensive relations amongst the same class; "you can go on with your little story."

"Then I beg to announce to you, that he's given Claudine the cold shoulder."

George wondered for a moment whether his name would be introduced, but he knew that the talkers were not men who were usually anxious to seek a quarrel, and he reflected that they could not know the cause of the rupture.

"He caught her with a man last night, on coming home from shooting," resumed the speaker.

"Then there was a row—blows, perhaps—Salers is not over particular.'

"Nonsense! you don't know him. He's a philosopher who takes things as they come, and women for what they're worth. He settled with the Marly, as he would settle his account at the end of the month."

"And the lover? What did he do?"

"What should he do? He had the best of it, after all, and he'd have been a fool to seek a quarrel with Salers, who declared himself satisfied."

"Quite right, but Claudine; she can't be very satisfied.

She'll have some trouble in finding what she's lost. Salers was a sound man, very sound."

"And the other one probably isn't. Who is he?"

"I don't know."

"Oh, you're artful. Why, it was hardly worth while raising our expectations."

"Upon my word, they didn't tell me the name."

"Who is 'they?' Was it Claudine who told you of the catastrophe?"

"No, it was her maid, Olga."

"You're going in for maids now, then?"

"My dear fellow, I know her well, because she used to be with Armande."

"Oh, of course, you were with Armande. You've served in the 'old guard.'"

"Yes, one generally begins with that; but at present I prefer the young. But that doesn't prevent me from keeping on good terms with Olga."

"Say at once that you take her out to dinner.'

"No, but we have a talk now and then, and I've just met her."

"Where? In society?"

"At the Bal de la Boule-Noire."

"Ha, ha, that's good! Gentlemen, you hear. Charles Deshaies, who sets up to be all that's correct, frequents dancing saloons."

"Certainly, my dear fellow. It's less stupid than a slow tea-party. I go there every Monday, and I've just come away."

"So it was there that the young person told you all about her mistress's business? Did you treat her to a glass of negus, by way of thanks? That form of refreshment is very much in vogue in those kinds of places."

"I thought of it, but Olga couldn't accept. She was with

her party, half-a-dozen gentlemen, in masher collars. Hers isn't so bad. Only, if I saw Claudine, I should recommend her to be on her guard against her maid's friends. Ernest goes to her place like his own. Ernest is Olga's lover, and the said Olga, as she came away from the dance, gave him the key for him to go and fetch her handkerchief from Madame Marly's."

"The deuce she did! Claudine has got a strong box, and if it's robbed, it will be her own fault. Then Olga didn't tell you the name of Salers's successor?"

"The successor? Well, from what she said, I should think that that gentleman contents himself with duping lovers. I did all I could to find out who he was; Olga told me that it was Madame Marly's secret."

"A close-tongued maid! That caps all."

"Oh, well, in two days' time we shall know it. Claudine will confide it to Caroline Lebarbier, who won't keep it four-and-twenty hours."

Upon this expression of opinion by Monsieur "Charles Deshaies, a sceptic by temperament, and a theatre-lounger by profession," talk became general, and no one was of the same mind as his neighbour. Some stood up for Caro, and declared that she would be torn in pieces, rather than betray a friend. Others praised the commercial probity of Claudine, who had executed an agreement with Paul Salers, and had adhered rigidly to its conditions, during the whole of the first term.

George de Gravigny, fearful lest his opinion should be asked, walked away, and went into the next room to reflect upon what he had just heard. Amongst all the incoherent talk that he had overheard, two things had made an impression on him: it appeared plain to him, in the first place, that his adventure of the day before would not remain a secret, and that the name of Madame Marly's new

lover would soon be in everyone's mouth; secondly, that Miss Olga was the most dangerous of maids. By keeping in her service a person who had such doubtful acquaintances Claudine certainly ran a risk of being robbed by some Boule-Noire rascal.

The open window occurred to him, and he reflected that it would perhaps be wiser not to go and finish the night in such a badly-looked-after house. Yet he had promised Madame Marly to go back there sometime or other that night, and he wanted to give her back her notes without delay. "I should be a fool," said George to himself, "to go and get mixed up in an acquaintance which will compromise me sooner or later, and may end in a scandal. I've got enough enemies already; it only remains for me to read my name in the papers in connection with some stirring event, something after this style: 'A lady, well known in certain circles, has just learnt to her cost that it is unadvisable to keep valuables in her house. Mademoiselle X. . . . has just been the victim of a robbery. Burglars obtained an entry into her rooms during the night, and forced a safe containing money and deeds. Suspicion at first fell on Monsieur de ——, who is intimately connected with Mademoiselle X. . . .; but he cleared himself by an *alibi*, and investigations are proceeding. We shall keep our readers informed as to the particulars of this strange affair.'

"No, I don't intend people shall talk about Monsieur de ——. I shall go to Claudine's to-night, to give her back the six thousand francs, that she pushed into my hand in spite of me, but I sha'n't go there again. If she wants to see me she can come to my place. It's for women to put themselves out, and I had a narrow escape for having given way to Madame de Benserade's extravagant fancies. I sha'n't start it again for the sake of doing the agreeable to Madame Marly."

This monologue was interrupted by the entry of a party of card-players who arrived to take part in the grand battle that had been looked forward to for the last three days. Monsieur de Gravigny was one of those valiant men who never retreat, and who pursue the enemy within their entrenchments. He was instantly surrounded, fêted, questioned, and his thoughts soon took another turn.

"You've come to settle the *boyard*," said a jolly-looking youth who was a member of all the clubs, and was always to be met with wherever the highest play was going on.

"And so have I. I haven't been here for the last three weeks, and I've suffered for it, for every blessed night I've left the Moutard, cleaned right out. So I hear that a Russian pigeon is going to settle to-night in the green room here?"

"You mean he's going to be *settled*," said a stock-broker in whose soul there was no poetry.

"It comes to the same thing. I rush hither, attracted by the scent of fresh blood. And I suppose Gravigny won't be found wanting."

"No, my dear count, but I suspect that the said pigeon will be somewhat difficult to pluck. The Muscovites defend themselves stoutly. What sort of a man is this Lounine?"

"A madman, like all his countrymen. It's in the blood. I saw a good deal of him four years ago, and I was glad to be friendly to him, for his luck was fearful at every game he tried his hand at. He used to play Rubicon for louis points, and used to lose from two to three thousand at every sitting. Men used to wait for him on the stairs of the club and propose a game of piquet. I never saw him win but once—seven thousand francs, off your uncle, who was furious."

"Well, he knew when to leave off, as he left Paris," said George.

"Oh, it wasn't that he was disgusted. He has an unheard-of fortune, my dear fellow—sixty millions, possibly eighty. And he's never so pleased as when he's losing."

"Then why did he go?"

"It was never rightly known. People who professed to know gravely said that an order from his emperor recalled him to St. Petersburg. For my part I looked on it as the whim of a *blasé* man who goes as he came—without any appreciable motive. Now, those who think themselves very clever say that he went simply because his mistress gave him up."

"As loving as that!"

"Not he! He liked the woman because he thought she brought him ill-luck. She gave him up. He was afraid of winning—and fled."

"The explanation appears to me unlikely," muttered George, who knew well who the lady in question was.

"It's absurd. But it's none the less true that the Marly is the very reverse of a *mascotte*. Her name for that is undoubted. If a man wants to ruin himself, he has only got to ally himself with her. You know her, I suppose?"

"Oh, very slightly. But I have been told that the prince's successor wasn't unlucky."

"Paul Salers! he never plays cards; consequently he can't lose. But I shouldn't advise you, my dear fellow, who are an inveterate gambler, to have anything to do with her. You'd lose at every hand."

George could not repress a slight grimace. This prediction was especially distasteful to him. On the other hand, he was not unpleased to note that his recent adventure with Claudine was not yet the news of the day. If the clubman who was speaking to him had known of it, he would certainly not have talked as he had done, for he was well bred and had always shown sympathy for the some-

what broken-down gentleman whom he met everywhere, except in the best society.

"What the deuce can this phenomenal prince have been doing in Russia for the last three years?" asked Gravigny, with a careless air.

"What his government did after the Crimean war," replied the jolly count, laughing. "You remember what Gortschakoff said: 'Russia is collecting herself;' Lounine has been collecting himself."

"And he's had enough of it, apparently, since he's come back."

"I suppose he's going to look out for some other fair bringer of bad luck; but until he has found her we may be sure that he'll have enough of good to put us all on straw."

"What sort of sums does he stake?" asked a bystander.

"He doesn't stake, and for a very good reason. He'd never get a bank strong enough to play his game. He deals."

"And he takes the rest after every hand?"

"The rest, and everything that anyone likes, in the bargain. Lounine will play you for your money, your mistress, or your skin, if you like. I've heard that once, at Moscow, he played, with another fool of his own stamp, for who should blow their brains out."

"And he won?"

"Probably, since he's in Paris," replied the count, laughing heartily. "If at the time of that memorable game he had had the Marly for a mistress, we should never have seen him again, and he would not win our money of us to-night."

"Moral: we ought to wait till he's made it up with Claudine. I must persuade Paul Salers to give her up to him. He might well do it for the sake of his friends."

"I shall never have the patience to wait till he's made up his mind. I've got five hundred louis, and I'm off to the

card-room. The table must be full already. Are you coming, Gravigny?"

"Rather. I've only got two hundred louis to risk, but they're getting tired of stopping in my pocket."

"That's the style. *You're* not superstitious; my prognostics don't alarm you. You don't believe in Madame Marly's fatal influence."

"No," said George, rather embarrassed, "and there's some credit due to me for not believing in it."

"Has she favoured you, then? The deuce! that would be serious."

"It's not that. I only want to say that if I lose my four thousand francs I shall be cleaned out."

"Oh, you won't lose them. You lay your money out as no one else can, and you haven't an equal at taking advantage of good luck. I'm so convinced of that, that I mean to regulate my play according to yours. If you are broke, we'll be broke together."

"If we're at the same table. You know the places go by lot."

"And there will be plenty of applicants for them. The news of Lounine's arrival has set them all on foot. He has only been here three days, and they're talking about nothing else in all the clubs. By-the-bye, you did not know him when he was here before?"

"I've seen him in the Bois and at the theatre, that's all."

"Then I'll introduce you."

"As the lamb is introduced to the wolf," said George, smiling.

"Don't get those ideas into your head, my dear fellow. Boldness, boldness, and again boldness. That's my motto."

"It's mine too," muttered George. "And I'll prove it to you once more to-night, or rather this morning, for it's one o'clock."

"Come along then. Lounine is as punctual as an old soldier, although he doesn't appear to me to have fought much, except at Monaco."

This conversation had brought them to the end of a corridor which led into the far off room to which, according to a decision of the committee, the baccarat-players were regulated. The count pushed open the door of the sanctuary, and they entered.

"Well," thought George, "if I'd known that Claudine had that reputation, I don't think I should have left Madame de Benserade, and if I lose, my new acquaintance won't last long, I swear to that."

The room was already full and the tables prepared, but no one as yet had taken his seat. The players were talking, like soldiers talk in the bivouac on the morning before the battle, and it may be readily understood that their conversation was not of politics. Gamblers have never any other topic than cards. Every variety was represented in this preparatory reunion; the superstitious, those who cannot win unless they were wearing their fur overcoat, in spite of the ninety degrees of heat in the room, or else are sitting on some particular book; those who have at their watch-chain a coral ornament or castanets in their pocket; those who swallow a glass of Kümmel between each hand; those who remain standing all the time; the hesitating ones, who never know whether to draw another card; the timid, who hardly dare play if they have an eight or a nine; the showy ones, who play to the gallery; the veterans, who have given up baccarat and come to see others ruined; the professors, who prove by mathematics how it is an advantage to hold at three when one is banker and has dealt a nine to the heaviest hand; the waverers, who wait until one side has lost seven times before risking a louis.

George knew them all, and had little to do with them. He

had none of their manias, and never spoke when he was playing. Great emotions are silent.

"Too many, decidedly," whispered the count, who had come from the Jockey Club, attracted by the hope of a good game; "we shall be as crowded as if we were playing for macaroons at the fair of Saint Cloud. And in the midst of these small gentlemen I don't see the prince."

"Isn't that he over there, talking with that venerable old man?" asked George.

"Where do you find an old man? Ah, I see, it's Corbier. Well, he is old, but he's by no means venerable. He thrusts himself upon all the Russians, in order to sell his wines. I'll bet he's proposing to Lounine to buy a cask of Chambertin at this very moment. We'll go and do the boyard a good turn by rescuing him from the pressing attentions of this commercial traveller disguised as a gentleman. Come along."

They traversed the crowd and walked straight towards the prince, who spared them half their journey, for he had noticed the count, and seized the opportunity of escaping from a bore.

Lounine was a striking personage. Fair, slender and youthful, with a gentle air and careless bearing, and nothing of the Cossack about him. A girl's face and cunning smile. One would have taken him at first view for a freshly emancipated eldest son. But his eyes betrayed what he was; great light-blue eyes in which could be read the profound, desperate, incurable *ennui* of the man who desires nothing more, because he has tried everything. His manner, however, was sympathetic, and he greeted the count with that rather effeminate grace which sits so well on Russians.

"How are you, my dear count?" he asked in his soft drawling voice. "I'm charmed to see you. I was afraid I shouldn't find anyone to talk to here, but I came because I was told that warm work went on. They don't gamble now at the Union and Jockey—nothing but whist for louis points

and fifty on the rubber ; it's fearfully slow. What on earth has happened to make everyone so good, since I was last here ? A man won't know where to go soon to lose his money."

"There'll always be Monaco, my dear prince."

"Yes, but the climate of Monaco doesn't quite agree with me."

"You're difficult to please."

"No, I'm so constituted that what suits others doesn't suit me."

"Then it's true what you say—that you can't bear winning ?"

"Hate it, my dear fellow. It's stupid work, winning. But when a man's losing—that's life. Losing has the same effect on me as cold. It excites me."

"I know plenty of people who would be charmed to afford you that species of gratification very often," said the count, laughing. "But allow me to introduce Viscount George de Gravigny to you," he added.

Two words were wanting to the formula, and George did not fail to notice that the gentleman who had introduced him did not say, "my friend ;" but it was not worth while to put himself out in consequence of the omission, and he saluted the prince with that easy air which good society gives.

"I'm very pleased to know you, sir ;" said Lounine, shaking hands. "And the more pleased because I have often had the honour of meeting Count de Gravigny at the club. I presume he is a relation ?"

"My uncle, prince."

"Oh, then, you are my friend, and I beg you to treat me as such, for I have always had an admiration for your uncle. You play cards, I suppose ?"

"I must confess that I came here with the sole intention of doing so."

"And you're not the only one," said the count. "There are

twenty men round us, prince, who are waiting for you. Besides, you can see that the altar is prepared."

"These gentlemen will allow me to take the bank, will they not?"

"They would be very much put out if you didn't."

"Oh, I'm at their orders, and we'll begin when you like. But, first of all, tell me something about the ladies. I'm quite in the dark. It's four years since I left Paris."

"You'll find all those whom you left behind, prince. Plenty of old ones, and uncommonly few young. Pretty girls are getting rare, and the Bois contingent is still the same. Recruiting is becoming more and more difficult."

"I shall be able to console myself for that. I don't care for new books; I prefer to read old favourites. Can you tell me what has become of a charming woman, of whom I was desperately fond when I was last here?"

"Madame Marly?"

"Oh, you remember. Well, my dear fellow, I must confess she was charming. I lost more than a million roubles whilst we were together."

"And yet you left her?"

"Certainly not. It was she who left me. And I've never ceased to regret her."

"Really? But I suppose it only rests with you to renew the acquaintance?"

"No, I've made inquiries already. I've been told she's not at liberty."

"She might obtain it. You have freed your serfs."

"My dear fellow, this is not Russia. And it appears that Claudine is fond of her lover."

"Oh, he's a man who made some money on the Bourse, and hasn't, so far as I know, kept her in much style. I don't think Claudine would want much asking to make it up with you again. What do you think, Gravigny?"

George blushed. He was not prepared for this point-blank inquiry, and in order to dissimulate the effect which it produced on him, he replied rather drily:

"I have no information as to Madame Marly's preferences."

"Well, one can guess them well enough," cried the jolly count. "I'm sure she doesn't care much to go about on foot or in a cab, and that she'd prefer the turn-out that we used to admire three years ago. But will you give me permission, prince, to tell her, if I meet her, that you are disposed to receive her submission?"

"Give you permission! I entreat you to do so."

"Very well, it shall be done, but I must confess to you what is in my mind. You must know then, my dear prince, that we should all be enchanted to see Madame Marly your mistress again."

"So as to be able to treat me," said the prince, laughing heartily. "A first-rate idea. I sha'n't be at all unwilling."

"You don't misunderstand me. They say that Madame Marly carries bad luck with her, and as I hope to play often with you—you understand?"

"Certainly, it would suit me capitally, since I like losing. But there's a gentleman—what is his name?"

"Your unworthy successor? His name is Salers, and you will probably meet him, for he belongs to this club, and comes and lounges about the baccarat table occasionally, although he never plays."

"That's a pity. I should have proposed to him—"

"To play for Claudine! Ah, I'd willingly give five-and-twenty louis to be there. But Salers won't afford me that pleasure. He's a man who seldom smiles, and he lacks originality. Eh, Gravigny?"

"I know nothing about the gentleman," said George, impatiently.

"Nor I, indeed. I hardly know him at all. But we're losing a lot of time, prince. Suppose we begin?"

"Certainly, my dear count," said Lounine, walking towards the table. All the gamblers were watching him, and this movement was the signal.

"Take your seats, gentlemen," cried Corbier, the friend of boyards; "the prince is good enough to play."

"Corbier! my dear fellow," said the prince, with his Russian accent, that accent which charms like music; "do me the favour not to announce me in that style. If you make such a fuss these gentlemen will take me for a charlatan, and you for a—what do you call those men who stand in front of mountebanks' booths—clowns, I believe?"

"Exactly so, my dear prince," said the count, laughing; "you've learnt all the tricks of our language. Will you allow me to explain to these gentlemen, less boisterously, that it is your intention to make a bank—and on what conditions?"

"You will do me a favour, count; and as for the conditions, you will fix them yourself."

"The custom here is to put the bank up to auction, but I suppose that would be a useless formality to-day, as no one will oppose the prince."

"Yes," said a facetious gambler, "I'm ready to yield it if I don't improve on the first bid."

"Very well, sir," said Lounine, "I shall be able to bid a thousand louis against you as a start."

"Then I yield you the bank," retorted the joker. "I never risk more than forty francs at a time."

"No foolery!" cried two or three impatient punters.

"Well, we are all agreed," said the count, to whom his position as a member of the Jockey Club gave a kind of authority over the unruly crowd which the passion for play had collected round the green cloth. "The prince is ready, gentlemen; it only remains to draw for places."

This was quickly done. The servants were waiting to be summoned in order to carry it out; the cards and rakes were on the table. In the twinkling of an eye each one was seated: Lounine in the place reserved for the banker, George de Gravigny the third on the right, between a young provincial, lately admitted to the club, and an old retired colonel, who had never been out of it for the last seven years. Chance had placed the amiable count on the left, almost opposite George.

"Gentlemen," said the prince, drawling his words, "I have only a hundred thousand francs on me, but I shall take all bets, if I may be allowed to settle my losses with cheques, as soon as the sum exceeds that which I place on the table."

In support of this remark he took from his pocket a packet of notes and a book, each page of which he could convert into a draft on Rothschild's by putting his name to it. A thrill of excitement ran through all the punters, who were not used to such royal ways.

"Just to think that with a little luck one might win a million or two," sighed the little countryman, counting the couple of dozen louis which he intended to risk.

The colonel, who had placed in front of him two hundred-franc notes, moved about in his chair, expressing his feelings by incoherent words, and the end of his cane, placed crosswise on his knees, touched up his neighbour's *tibia*. George de Gravigny sorted his counters and calmly prepared to attack Russia. He paid no more heed to the sinister predictions which for the last hour had been buzzing in his ears, and he was full of confidence, for he felt himself in possession of all his faculties.

Claudine's new lover possessed in the highest degree the two qualities which make great players: boldness and coolness. He always knew how he stood, even in the heat of the most furious game, even in those anxious moments when

desperate struggles take place between ruined gamblers. He had none of those puerile failings from which many veterans are not free. He did not impose on himself the obligation of only plunging on his own hand. He did not fix upon a certain sum to be won, any more than he promised himself to save from the wreck any portion of the sum which he had with him. All or nothing, such was his motto. But he applied it with such clearness of mind, with so much opportuneness and such a perception of possible chances, that he had a real advantage over those prudent men who do not venture enough, and the reckless who venture too much.

To-night he saw a prospect of making a fortune, an almost unlimited fortune. It was in front of him, in that book which Lounine had just laid on the table. It was not a case now of having to struggle long to make a few hundred louis. A few lucky bets would suffice to win an enormous sum. And if the worst were to happen, George could only find himself again in the position which he had been in that morning, before meeting Daubrac, for he could not lose more than he possessed. There was no playing without ready money, and his credit was exhausted at the cashier's office.

The game began mildly, as is usual. Each one was testing his luck, which failed to declare itself clearly. There were no series, and losses and gains almost balanced one another. However, those on the left were more unlucky than those on the right. The count had very shortly changed his third thousand-franc note, whilst George saw his heap increasing—slightly, it is true, for he only staked a modest five louis each time.

The prince played correctly, like a man who was used to it, but there was a certain *nonchalance* in his manner, and it could be seen from his face that he had expected to meet more redoubtable adversaries. He was too polite to express

the disdain with which the trifling bets, the highest of which did not exceed two hundred louis, inspired him. But George, who was a good judge of character, guessed the prince's thoughts, and knew that he would not hesitate long to end the proceedings, if they continued their present rate of progression.

It only depended on the punters to enliven the game by backing their hands, but although there were men there who were not frightened at a large loss, no one seemed disposed to venture much, and George himself hesitated to make a serious attempt on the bank. He watched the prince and saw well enough that the mistakes that he made turned to his own advantage—a sign of luck, if ever there was one, and the more marked that those mistakes were unintentional. This Russian evidently knew all the finesses of baccarat, and whether he drew to six or held at two, it was pure caprice on his part. It was certainly not the proper moment to risk anything against a man who benefitted thus by his own imprudence.

Presently, however, Gravigny got a hand, and played it vigorously. Commencing from ten louis, he arrived, at the sixth throw, at six hundred and forty, and the other players began to watch him. Those who had followed him—at a distance, for no one had bet to the same extent—blessed him, and regulated their play on his. Those who had held aloof swore to themselves, some even aloud. His neighbour, the colonel, furious at having missed such a splendid chance, gave some more savage thrusts with his cane.

"Half?" asked Lounine, smothering a yawn.

This question, put in a certain tone, decided George.

"No, I stake all," he replied coolly.

He felt a presentiment that these scornful ways would bring the prince bad luck. The cards were dealt. He got a five, and held, without hesitating a second—that second

of indecision which is so often the punter's death, because it indicates the point to the banker. The prince held a six. He was deceived by George's decided air and drew another card—an eight, which destroyed his point, and he lost against the right of the table. The left had only three, and the count parted with his last louis.

"Serves me right," said Lounine, bursting out laughing. "I played like an ass."

And he gracefully pushed forward twelve thousand-franc notes, accompanied by eight five-louis counters.

His face began to brighten.

"He's losing; he'll stop here now, since he likes losing," thought George. "And this time I think I have him."

The stakes were twenty-five thousand: George got a nine. There were murmurs of admiration. The count, who was the finest player in the world, and who was interested in him, gave the lucky punter a sympathetic smile.

"We play for the fifty?" said Lounine, doubtfully.

"Certainly, prince," replied George, without hesitation.

It was a solemn moment. There was silence whilst the cards fell one by one. Lounine took his up, and spoke the words which deliver the punters from the agonies of cutting. He said: "I deal."

George looked at his hand for a moment, when the countryman on his left asked him some stupid question, to which he was foolish enough to reply: "Yes."

The prince at once took another card from the pack, and was about to turn it over, when Monsieur de Gravigny said quickly: "Excuse me, I didn't ask for another."

"But I think I heard you answer, yes," replied Lounine, quietly.

"Not to you; to this gentleman."

"That doesn't matter; the card is drawn; you're forced to take it," said two or three players on the left.

Those on the right disputed it energetically.

"Let's consult the spectators," said the count, who had been cleaned out the previous hand. "I propose, gentlemen, to select as arbitrator some one who knows the game well, and who is not interested in the question; not being a player, I propose to abide by the decision of Monsieur Paul Salers, who has just come in, and is standing behind you, my dear Gravigny."

The name was greeted with a murmur of astonishment. Every one in the club knew that Paul Salers did not play, and no one expected to hear his authority invoked for the purpose of deciding a doubtful point.

But the member of the Jockey Club, who had proposed Monsieur Paul Salers, knew very well what he was doing in thus selecting Madame Marly's lover. He remembered what the prince had said to him before the game began, and he thought it a good joke to give him an opportunity of making some eccentric proposal.

And he was not far wrong. The prince raised his eyes at once and looked fixedly at Monsieur Salers, with an air of interest of which George well knew the real cause. The count, moreover, in order to accentuate his malicious intentions, made signs of intelligence to George, and George wished him at the devil. The arrival of his predecessor seemed to him a bad augury, and he was not at all anxious to see him enacting with Lounine the scene which the count wished to bring about. There was one thing that he was specially anxious not to do, and that was, to take a card, for he had six already, and, in drawing another, he would have run a great risk of spoiling his hand.

He did not turn round, intending to show that he did not care about accepting Monsieur Salers s arbitration. The prince, on the contrary, agreed eagerly. He was delighted to be placed in relations with a man from whom he wanted to win Claudine.

"I will abide absolutely by what this gentleman decides," he said, in the most gracious manner.

"I'm very much obliged to you, gentlemen, for the good opinion you have of my competence, but questions of baccarat are not within my province," said Monsieur Salers coldly.

The majority of players were on George's side, and maintained that it was impossible to make him suffer for a mistake which was not of his making. It was not his fault if the banker had misunderstood him. But there were also fanatical sticklers for rules, men who would insist that cards should only be played by mutes. And Monsieur de Gravigny had also against him those who were envious of him, those who cannot bear their neighbour to win, when they are losing. The gallery—that is to say, the simple spectators who had come to look at an exciting game—the gallery was divided in opinion.

"Sir," resumed the count, who clung to his idea, "it is exactly because you never play that we ask you to decide this question. It is solely a question of common sense, and we are certain of your impartiality."

"We are all agreed upon that point," said Lounine. "For my part I ask to be judged by Monsieur Salers, and it seems to me that my opponent does the same."

There was little foundation for the latter part of this speech, for George had received the proposal of arbitration very coldly; but, from a feeling of pride, he thought best to acquiesce by a gesture of indifference, a gesture which signified: "It's all the same to me; I'm right, and no one can make me wrong."

"We're wasting time," cried several of those who are always in a hurry to lose their money. "Let the question be settled. Come along, Salers; decide it, since everyone wishes it."

"You really desire it?" said Salers, shrugging his shoulders.

"Yes, yes."

"Well, my opinion is, that the card should be dealt, since it was taken up; and it was taken up because the answer 'yes' was given to the banker's question. The banker had no means of knowing that the 'yes' was not addressed to him. Now, the rule is absolute: a mistake can only prejudice him who committed it."

George turned pale. This decision was probably the ruin of all his hopes, for it was long odds that this forced drawing would cause him to lose. But he raised no objection.

"He's having his revenge," he thought. "He condemns me because I took Claudine from him. They're right to say she brings bad luck."

"That decides it. Hurry up!" exclaimed an impatient chorus.

"Since it is decided," said the prince, politely addressing George, "here is the card, sir, and I hope it is a good one."

He stretched out his hand, and George shut his eyes, so as not to see it—the fatal card which in all likelihood would cause him to lose fifty thousand francs.

Exclamations were heard on all sides. The prince had dealt a *three*.

This was splendid for George, unless indeed he had already held the seven. And as he had shown his cards to no one, those who were playing on his hand might, in fact, have reason to fear that it *was* seven.

His impassibility was admirable. Not a muscle of his face moved. His eyes had not the flash of joy which the unhoped-for nine could betoken. He did not forget that the banker could still equalise matters by a lucky draw, and he would not allow him to see that chance had given him victory.

However, the prince had made up his mind to draw. He had seven, and he reasoned, with much coolness, that Monsieur de Gravigny, who had refused to draw, could only have five, six, or seven. With five or six the three would be a winning card; with seven, a losing one.

"If I keep to my present hand," said the artful Russian, "there are two chances against me, and one for. Therefore, I can't keep to it."

And he drew a card which provoked fresh manifestations. *It was another three.*

Everyone tried to read on the prince's face the impression which this produced, and everyone thought the prince had won, for he began to laugh heartily.

"I have baccarat, gentlemen," said he, spreading out his cards on the table, "unless this gentleman has it too."

"I have nine," replied George.

And he showed the two threes that he had in his hand, two lucky threes, which a third card of the same value had transformed into the winning point.

Cries of admiration saluted this extraordinary run of luck.

"Chance was just," said Lounine. "Monsieur de Gravigny consented to abide by a rigorous rule. If it had not been applied to him he would have lost, as I had seven and he six. I did my best to improve my point, and I think that, in drawing, I played the right game. But I'm delighted that my opponent has won."

George was delighted too. A hundred thousand francs were a fortune to him. With a hundred thousand francs he could begin life again. The others looked at him with sympathetic admiration. An opportune three obtained for him the respect of fools. There were men there who for long enough had avoided recognising him, and who were already smiling encouragingly on him.

Monsieur Salers was, no doubt, less satisfied, for he had walked away from the table immediately after the miraculous game, of which the responsibility rested entirely with him.

"We go on, I suppose?" said the Russian, pointing to his cheque-book.

"Take care, prince," said the member of the Jockey Club, 'I don't believe there are enough cards."

"That is so," replied Lounine, after having rapidly counted those remaining in the pack, "there are not enough to go round. I will take another deal if you will permit me, gentlemen."

"Ten more!" replied the partners, encouraged by Gravigny's success.

"Then, gentlemen, be good enough to shuffle," said the prince carelessly, throwing the cards into the basket, which the punters immediately set about emptying; the basket, vulgarly called the "bucket," or "the grave of illusions."

George tranquilly lit a cigar, after having drawn towards him with a rake a mountain of notes; but at heart he was much perplexed. To depart with his winnings or run the risk of doubling or losing them: such was the problem which fortune, who had just treated him like a spoilt child, presented to him. And George congratulated himself on the fact of having a moment's respite to decide upon it.

The prince had got up, under pretext of stretching his legs, and was manœuvring to approach Paul Salers, who was talking with a friend at the end of the room. The count, completely cleaned out, and in pursuit of his idea, went after Lounine.

"Shall I give you an interview with your successor?" he asked, laughing. "You've just won all my money, and I sha'n't be sorry to have a chance to win it back some day.

So I beg you to believe that if it depended on me to give you back the unlucky Madame Marly, I should do it this very evening."

"Oh, my dear fellow, how grateful I should be to you! And I think we might accost this gentleman, to talk about the judgment that he has just delivered."

"An excellent idea, prince. I know him well enough to introduce him. He'll be very flattered, and I'll lead the conversation on to the lady."

At that moment Paul Salers came up to them. He bowed to them first, and said gaily:

"I see you are looking for me, gentlemen, and I know why. Ferry, who is as interested in the matter as myself, has just told me that the prince regrets Claudine. I should ask nothing better than to withdraw if I was still with her, but it is already done. She has replaced me by Monsieur de Gravigny, who, however, does not seem to have much ill-luck at play."

"What!" cried the prince, "Monsieur de Gravigny is Madame Marly's lover?"

"Since yesterday," replied Paul Salers.

"Incredible! But just think that he's won a hundred thousand francs of me in a few throws."

"No doubt because he had not had the time to become impregnated with the bad luck which Claudine brings," said the count, laughing. "But that will come, if you don't rob him of her. And if you left her with him it would be a lamentable thing, from several points of view. In the first place, Gravigny is not rich enough for Madame Marly, and then, if she made it up with you, we should have a chance of winning a lot of money of you."

"But Monsieur de Gravigny likes her, perhaps."

"Oh, Gravigny never cares for women—not those, at least, who care for him. And if he made a big loss, I think he

would be indifferent about Claudine. But he doesn't seem in that way to-night."

"Oh, luck may change—if he stays."

"He'll stay. I know him."

"Then I shouldn't be surprised to win back the few crowns he has had of me. Now that I know he's with Madame Marly my confidence returns."

"I should be sorry for him to lose," said the count. "Poor George isn't rich, and if he left in your victorious hands the two hundred louis that he brought here to start the game with, I don't think he'd have anything left. Deal gently with him, prince."

"Believe me, my dear count, that if it only rested with me, Monsieur de Gravigny would go away a heavy winner. I have never regretted so much that I cannot cheat. If I possessed that talent I would cause myself to lose every game."

Paul Salers, having said what he wanted to say, bowed politely to the Russian and went up to the table. Lounine knew now that Claudine belonged to George. This was all that Paul Salers wished.

Whilst these gentlemen were occupying themselves with his business George was deliberating within himself. A hundred thousand francs are good to keep, but a million is better to take. A million—a fortune, a solid fortune, one which allows a man a handsome regular income, instead of living from hand to mouth and spending his capital. The chance of assuring a lasting independence in one evening made it well worth the while to risk the thousands acquired so easily. Moreover, Gravigny believed that he was in luck. The miraculous game which had just been decided in his favour, the last throw, so stoutly contested, the three which had fallen from heaven at the opportune moment—all seemed to him to foretell success. But he knew that luck at play is a

flame which flickers and is extinguished instantly. So much the worse for those who do not profit by its transient light. Accordingly George made up his mind to divide his winnings into four equal parts of twenty-five thousand francs each, and endeavour to win three times with each, doubling the stakes each time.

All the players had their eyes on him; they felt that a veritable duel was about to take place between the most impassible of bankers and the most intrepid of punters.

The cards were shuffled, and the prince resumed his seat. He had still in front of him two or three thousand-franc notes, and about a hundred louis were from the left of the table, which had done nothing but lose from the commencement of the game. This was more than sufficient to pay small bets, reserving for the settlement of Monsieur de Gravigny's future winnings the cheque-book—that mine of gold into which he had only to plunge his hand.

The Russian shuffled the cards for a moment, as a matter of form, and asked Monsieur de Gravigny to cut. The count had not sat down; he had taken his position behind the prince, and Paul Salers had placed himself in front of George, who could very well have done without this *vis-à-vis*.

"I am ready, gentlemen," said the prince graciously. "Make your games." George moved his first stake forward with perfect calmness. Encouraged by the example, his neighbour, the colonel, staked four louis, which were snapped up in the twinkling of an eye, in company with the twenty-five thousand. The prince had begun with a nine.

George did not wince, but the old warrior got terribly excited, and his cane once more hammered the knees of the viscount, who was too much occupied with the progress of the game to take any notice of what was going on under the table.

The second engagement was rather tougher, but had the same result, after an exciting draw, which gave the banker *one*, and baccarat to the right of the table. The colonel bounded in his chair, and involuntarily thrust his cane into George's side, whom this final touch settled.

"Sir," said he furiously, "this is intolerable. You are constantly pushing me with your cane. A man doesn't bring a stick to a card-table. If it's a charm, at least put it in a vertical position."

"Yes, sir, it is a charm," cried the old fellow, rising abruptly, "and as soon as I'm forced to admit it, its virtue goes."

A unanimous burst of laughter greeted this sally, and the colonel went off in a towering rage to take his charm to some other club. Amusing as this incident was, it did not cause Gravigny to forget that in less than five minutes the half of his winnings had gone back to Russia. A glimmer of sense enlightened him for a moment. The idea occurred to him to get up and go off with the sum which was still amply sufficient to console him for the two hands he had just lost. But Salers was looking at him and reading his thoughts. Claudine's late lover was visibly rejoicing at witnessing his successor's discomfiture, and he appeared to be wondering within himself whether George would have the courage to go through it to the end. George remained.

He lost the third in the same manner as the first. George had only one portion left. He was heroic. Instead of cutting it up, so as to multiply his chances, he added to it the remainder of the two hundred louis with which he had started—his uncle's two hundred louis—and thrust it forward with such a determined air that murmurs of admiration arose around him.

This time fortune favoured him. The stakes were doubled

again. He did not withdraw it, and it doubled itself again. The prince, still calm and smiling, paid and waited.

Would he be obliged at last to write the formidable sum of a hundred and twelve thousand francs in his cheque-book yet intact? Would capricious fortune return to the bold gambler whom she had deserted? George thought so, and said: "I stake the whole."

The impassible Lounine dealt the cards one by one. Every one held his breath. Gravigny had seven. The prince had seven too. A fresh start had to be made. Chance did not spare its warnings to Madame Marly's lover. He would not hear them.

Continuing, the court-card falling on a miserable *two* crushed George's last hopes.

"I have five, and hold," said the banker softly.

George bowed to his vanquisher and rose without saying a word.

"You are going, sir?" said Lounine, in the most caressing voice.

"Yes; I have no more money," replied George, walking towards the door.

"If you would care to go on, I should be happy to take your I O U's."

"I should *not* care," replied George coldly.

And he left the room without looking behind him. He even left the club, from fear of succumbing to the temptation of returning to play, and walked towards the Madeleine, without knowing whither he was going. He had death in his soul and rage in his heart. He cursed the smooth-mannered prince, he cursed himself, and he cursed Claudine, who was quite powerless in the matter. He had seen Paul Salers speak to the Russian, and he had no doubt that Lounine knew now that Madame Marly had been the Viscount de Gravigny's mistress since the day before.

"He was very nearly proposing to me to stake her against the hundred thousand francs that he had just won back from me," said he, between his teeth. "She won't cost him as much as that, for I'll give her up to him for nothing. They're all right—the girl brings bad luck. I'll wait till he's taken her before I play against him again. "Play!" he continued, raising his hand; "what with? I haven't a louis left, and I don't know where to get a hundred-franc note."

All at once he struck his forehead and halted. He had just remembered that Claudine's six thousand francs were still in his pocket-book. He had not touched them—possibly because he had never thought of them. But he thought of them now, and he remarked to himself that with this forgotten reserve he might break the bank. He had won a hundred thousand francs with ten louis.

Play was still going on, and the club was not far off, for the recollection of the six thousand francs struck him just as he arrived at the end of the Boulevard de la Madeleine. He was so excited that he sat down on a seat. The place was deserted. A cold rain was falling, and after two o'clock in the morning, in winter, foot-passengers are not plentiful in that locality. The belated ones who were hastening home and who saw George leaning against the back of the seat, must have taken him for some poor devil who was passing the night there, for want of a bed. They were much mistaken, for the viscount knew full well where a bed was to be had. And not one suspected the storm that was raging in the brain of that young elegant who was lost in meditation, with no thought of the temperature.

What resolution had he come to when he got up after half-an-hour's furious argument within himself? Certainly not that of returning to the club, for he set off at full speed in the direction of the Rue de l'Arcade, and five minutes afterwards he stopped in front of Claudine's house.

"She is in bed," he muttered; "they've shut the window that was open when I was here at twelve o'clock—and there appears to me to be a light in the bedroom. Come! I must end the business to-night. I've had enough of ill-luck and the woman who brings it."

He rang: the doorkeeper did not keep him waiting, and he entered hastily.

VI.

There are no clubs on the outer boulevards, but there are balls, many balls, and dancing goes on every night from the Charonne to L'Etoile. All classes of society are represented there—with the exception of the highest—and each room has its frequenters, from the Salle Favier, where the Nanas of Belleville make their *débuts*, to the Salle Dourlans, where glitter the coachmen and grooms of the aristocratic mansions of the Quartier de l'Avenue de Wagram. *Musettes* flourish all along the line, the respectable *musettes* where the charcoal-burners of Auvergne stamp their interminable dances. But a lower class has established its head-quarters between the Chaussée-Clignancourt, and the Rue Lepic Montmartre is also theirs.

The Château-Rouge is by no means within their domains. Clerks and dressmakers predominate there. There might still be found Paul de Kock's *grisette*, that type which has disappeared like antediluvian animals. But Bohemia has its Elysée, Boule-Noire and Reine-Blanche.

The Elysée has its attractions. Painting is there represented by joyous young artists escaped from the neighbouring studios. The celebrated Café of the "Dead Rat" sends thither its deputations of independent ladies. The Reine-Blanche goes in for specialities. The Boule-Noire is almost neutral territory. It is the left centre of the dancing world. Respectable girls risk themselves there if they are not proud, and workmen do not turn up their noses at it. But

the real *habituées*, those who constitute the backbone of the attendance, are servants. Not those in great families; they go to the Bal De l'Opéra to show off the dresses of the marchionesses whom they wait on. Only those young ladies who love to thread the mazy, whilst *madame* is out for the evening. *Madame* is sometimes a citizen's wife, or more often a gay lady who has arrived at a certain position in the world. If *madame* is married she will never set foot in the Boule-Noire; if she is not, she used to go there after she made her début, but now no longer. The maid is certain of not being caught tripping.

Claudine Marly had shown her pretty feet there in the now distant days of her youth, but she was not of an age now to indulge in excursions to the barrier. Olga had no fear of meeting her there, and Olga could enjoy to the full the balls which recalled such sweet remembrances.

It was there that she had met Ernest, in the Exhibition year, the first of Monsieur Paul Salers's reign. She had taken a fancy to him at once, this great fellow who professed to be making ten francs a day, by engraving on glass. It was not that he was very handsome, but he wore light grey trousers, and boots up to his knees, like a groom at the Fernando Circus. And, besides, he knew how to talk to women and treat them as they like. Ernest had decided ideas about such acquaintances, ideas which are not generally avowed now-a-days, but which formerly were those of many gentlemen. Porthos, departing for the wars, was quite willing that his mistress should equip him. Ernest, who worked little, and fought still less, treated Olga in the same way as Porthos did the wife of the *procureur* at the Châtelet. Ernest was a musketeer who had been born too late for his time.

He was not a bad fellow, however, and more tender and less exacting than the majority of his kind; he was full of

regard for the providential Olga, who gave him the means to live like a lord, and he loved to exhibit her to his swell friends, for this conquest had given him quite a position.

Olga was what is called a fine woman, in a class of society which respects stoutness, which is a sign of wealth. She had plenty of sense, a good appearance, and her dresses suited her to perfection. When she appeared in the promenade which surrounds the space set apart for dancing, showing off her shapely hips in one of Madame Marly's newest dresses, escorted by the haughty looking Ernest, and several gentlemen of less importance, Olga had the air of a queen, surrounded by her court. Her entry always created a sensation.

The little nurses dancing polkas pointed her out to their partners, and said, sighing: "She's lucky!" The attendants bowed to her. A table was kept for her at the far end of the room, on the right, the best place for seeing, for Olga rarely deigned to mingle with the dancers. A quadrille, never. At most a valse, when it was the *Valse des Roses*, of which she was passionately fond. During the rest of the time she queened it, seated on a chair which was reserved for her. Her greatness kept her tied down to the table where she treated Ernest and his band to glasses of negus, and right heartily did they all enjoy themselves.

On this particular Monday, however, the Monday which had seen the birth of Claudine's new love, Olga was inclined to be melancholy. She was very fond of Madame Marly, and she was not at all pleased at the revolution which had just taken place at home. To dethrone Monsieur Salers in order to replace him by a handsome fellow without either land or money, seemed to be a dangerous act of folly. She prophesied a crash; she foresaw stamped paper, the precursor of ruin. Madame Marly would not come to that. Madame Marly had almost a fortune of her own. But Olga was paid

to mistrust true lovers, and the viscount's fair moustaches caused her to be apprehensive. She preferred Ernest's whiskers, whiskers cut on a level with his ears, and which, nevertheless, cost a good deal of money to keep lustrous.

Olga was uneasy about her dear mistress's future, and as she concealed nothing from her lover, she had confided her troubles to him whilst they were dining together in the kitchen at the Rue de l'Arcade. Claudine, who was going to meet George at the Café Anglais, had left the field clear; the cook had taken herself off to treat a fireman, who had promised to marry her. Olga and her top-booted lover had not failed to do justice to a Strasbourg pie bought by Monsieur Salers at Madame Bontoux' before the rupture, washed down with a bottle of Claudine's Bordeaux.

Ernest did not share Olga's fears. Madame Marly's furniture, and, above all, her strong-box, a pretty affair in rosewood, bound with iron, and set into the wall of her bedroom, all this solid and available property seemed to him to preclude all idea of ruin, whether voluntarily or forced. He thought Claudine was not to be pitied. "And, besides," said he, twirling his moustaches, "the viscount can't be jealous. All these tip-top swells are in the swim, just the same as we."

Olga was possibly of the same opinion, but she did not admit it, and in order to drive away her mournful feeling, she had taken Ernest to the ball, where numerous friends awaited them. There, again, her troubles began. Ernest began to walk about amongst the tables and dancers, in his grey trousers, and without her. He disappeared at the far end of the room; Olga fancied she saw him hanging around a yellow *chignon* which was very well known in the cafés of the Place Pigalle, and, to crown all, just as she was about to interfere, she was accosted by a gentleman whom she had seen very often at Mademoiselle Armande's, the Charles

Deshaies who, two hours afterwards, related his meeting and conversation with Claudine's maid. She had very little to say to him, and they did not talk long. And yet she had arrived too late to surprise Ernest red-handed. The yellow *chignon* had made up to one of his friends, and they were talking of going in a band, after the dance, to supper at Coquet's, the Brébant of that neighbourhood.

Olga put a good face on it, but in reality was in a furious rage. Olga was as jealous as a tigress, and she was not inclined to let Ernest see that she mistrusted him. She consented to the proposal of supper, with half-a-dozen friends of both sexes, amongst whom was the lady whom she had been watching. And, as it was fated that nothing should go right with her that evening, she discovered, on consulting her purse, that she had not enough money to pay her score, and that of Ernest, as is the custom amongst the peculiar society with whom she took her pleasure. The idea at once struck her to seize on this pretext in order to temporarily get the charming cavalier whose boots made so many conquests out of the way. She wanted to profit by his absence to mate the yellow *chignon* with a partner who would look after her so well, that Ernest would not be able to approach her during supper. She only needed to dispatch him to the Rue de l'Arcade to fetch three louis which she had left in her room, at the bottom of a glove-box, which he knew well, and to go and await him with her friends at Coquet's.

Ernest was rather unwilling; he did not care about doing the pleasure of his mistresses. It was a principle with him. But the case was an exceptional one. Olga could not be made to look foolish when the bill was presented, so Ernest consented to perform the commission. Olga gave him the key of the rooms, and he went off, promising to return quickly, for he intended to take the first cab he met.

Olga sat down to table gaily. Everyone paid court to her, to console her for her widowhood. The yellow *chignon* had found a cavalier. "No more jealousy; nothing but fun now!" thought Madame Marly's maid. But she soon found that she had not got to the end of her troubles.

They had begun the oysters at midnight. At two o'clock they had finished coffee, all the bottles were empty, and Ernest had not made his appearance. Where was he? Olga had been wondering for the last hour and a half; she lost herself in conjectures, and strange ideas came into her head *à propos* of his inexplicable absence.

Olga thought she knew him well, this handsome Ernest who had such a hold on her affections. She knew that he was liable to play her tricks now and then, in order to show her that the women ran after him, and to keep her up to the mark. This was his system, and he put it into practice whenever he fancied that his mistress was growing rather cool towards him. But he never carried things so far as to make her a laughing-stock before friends. He knew women's nature, and although he sometimes permitted himself to arouse Olga's jealousy, he never wounded her pride. Therefore to have exposed her to ridicule to-night must be in consequence of some extraordinary circumstances.

The yellow *chignon* had not left the table, her choice had fallen upon a little pink and white hairdresser, who paid her devoted attention. Therefore Ernest's absence had nothing to do with her. And there was no likelihood that he had gone off with anyone else, whilst his friends were awaiting him, and Olga was being consumed with impatience.

Finally, the soft-hearted maid had begun to wonder whether she had not been guilty of an imprudent act in confiding the key of the rooms to her lover. Ernest had peculiar ideas as to the rights of property, but he boasted that he was honest, and possibly he believed that he was.

There are certain men who have a moral code of their own, and who carefully avoid any dealings with the police. And why should they steal? Their life is an easy one. And the handsome Ernest was one of these.

"Never mind," thought Olga, "I ought not to have exposed him to temptation. He knows that madame's cash box is well stocked, and a secret lock wouldn't bother him. He is so strong, and so clever, not to mention that madame often leaves gold and jewellery on her chimneypiece, and she mayn't even have locked up the six thousand francs that she had from her broker. Ah, if he'd served me that trick, I would never see him again—and yet, if—I'm such a fool that I'd send him money if he was in prison. But I should be compromised. Madame would square accounts with me, and then who knows but what they'd send me into the country to the 'villa' in the Faubourg Saint-Denis. Ah! it makes me cold to think of it."

"They're going to shut up, my little dears; it's two o'clock," said the little hairdresser. "Don't worry yourself, Madame Olga. Ernest's got a headache and gone to bed. Sarah will settle for all; it's her turn to treat."

Sarah was the yellow *chignon*. She had not to be asked twice to pay for the supper, for she desired nothing better than to show a rival that she had plenty of money. To tell the truth, the bill was the least of Olga's anxieties. She was known in the restaurant, and had no fear of being kept in pawn. But she could not get Ernest out of her head. What had become of him?

"There!" said she to herself, "I'm a fool to worry. He can't have been up to any mischief at home, for madame must have been there when he got to the Rue de l'Arcade. Caroline Lebarbier's tea-parties always finish at twelve, unless they have a game of cards, and madame told me she shouldn't play. I suppose he's seen a light, and hasn't

dared to go up. My room is so near madame's. Yes, but why was he so rude? It's possible, after all, that he may have had a headache. He's subject to them, poor darling—or else, again, he may have wanted to show me that he didn't care for that slut of a Sarah, he knows that I've got leave to be out all night, and he supposed that I should think of going to his place; it's close to here, I'll go there."

The bill was paid, and the waiter put out the gas. Olga asked her companions of both sexes to accompany her to Ernest's home, which was a modest one, in a lodging-house on the Boulevard de Clichy. There she had the shock of learning that Ernest had not come in. The landlord had not gone to bed, and he had not seen his most elegant lodger. He politely offered to let Olga wait, but she refused. She wondered more and more, and was anxious to hurry to the Rue de l'Arcade. This she did, taking a cab. She had enough change to pay the driver, and she wished to arrive there alone.

Accordingly, she left the joyous band, who dared not laugh at her misfortunes, but who had rare sport after she had gone. And whilst the horse was going at a slow trot along the Rue d'Amsterdam, the deserted Olga began afresh to meditate on Ernest's behaviour. And, by dint of reflection, she had an idea, which appeared to her a happy one.

"I see what's happened," she thought. "That brute of a doorkeeper can't bear him. He must have recognised him as he passed the lodge and wanted to make him go up the back stairs. Ernest, who won't stand any nonsense, has sent him flying. The doorkeeper's a vicious beast, and he's 'gone for' Ernest; Ernest could sit on a dozen like him, and has given him a good thrashing. The doorkeeper's called the police, and Ernest has been run in. Confound the doorkeeper! To prevent Ernest going up the front stairs because he's my sweetheart! Ernest who's a better man than the marquis on the

second floor, or anyone else in the house. He's an honour to the place, when he comes there. It's my fault, too," continued Olga, a little soothed by this monologue. "Instead of giving him the front door key, I ought to have given him the key of the door that opens into the kitchen. But I never thought of it. That Sarah made me forget myself. For the rest, it's lucky I kept the key, for I shouldn't have been able to get in without waking madame. I've got an idea, though, that she won't be asleep. She'll be waiting for her George, and if he's come she won't be asleep either. It's to be hoped she hasn't found Ernest out; she's forbidden me to have him here at night, and if she found it out it would spoil all."

Cabs do not travel like the wind, but the journey was not a long one, and Olga had not been meditating more than a quarter of an hour when the driver pulled up in front of the house where Madame Marly and the Marquis and Marchioness de Benserade lived. Ernest's mistress sprang out quickly, paid her fare more quickly still, and crossed the street to see whether there was a light in her mistress's rooms.

All was dark. Not a light at any window, either on the first, second, or top floors.

"Then madame hasn't come in, nor her lover either," thought Olga. "So much the better. She'll never suspect anything. What makes me mad is, that I daren't ask that beast of a doorkeeper whether he's seen Ernest, nor go out again after I've once gone in. Oh, well, I sha'n't have to wait a week for to-morrow. Madame will sleep till twelve o'clock, and I can run out early and make inquiries."

With this comforting thought she rang. The doorkeeper kept her waiting a short time; no doubt he was in his first sleep, and this agreed badly with Olga's supposition that he had been assaulted by Ernest. However, she did not stand knocking at the lodge window to question him. She ran quickly up the back stairs, and had soon mounted the forty

steps which led to the first floor. The small door was well known to her, and she opened it as softly as she could, in the improbable case that Madame Marly had already gone to bed.

The offices and the kitchen were on the right; Olga's bedroom, rather further on, at the end of a passage, which afterwards turned to the left and ran into the ante-room, which, in turn, communicated with the drawing-room.

Olga entered on tiptoe, silently gained the retreat which she occupied, and listened before locking herself in. Nothing was moving in madame's bedroom. Complete silence. Only a smell of tobacco reached her. Ernest had evidently been there and had remained a certain time, since he had lit his pipe. It was impossible to suspect the cook's fireman. She was out that night, and, besides, her room was on the sixth floor.

"It's not kind of him," thought the maid. "He knows madame won't have smoking here, and he'll let me in for something to-morrow morning—but I can't understand it. He's been up—so—he's not at home—he didn't come back to Coquet's—Let's see if has taken the three louis."

Olga lit a candle and went to the glove-box. It was empty.

"Ah, the scoundrel!" she muttered. "He's filled his purse, left me in the lurch, and gone off on the spree somewhere else. It's too bad, and he shall pay dearly for it. I'm not bad-humoured, but I don't care about being done like that. To-morrow I'll go and look him up as he's having breakfast at the café, and if I find that young actor from Montmartre, who wrote me a letter in poetry, we'll see—"

A faint but very distinct sound interrupted her vows of vengeance.

"That's in the drawing-room," she said to herself. "What can it mean? I heard quite plain. Someone knocked over a chair or a sofa. Someone's walking about without a light,

that's plain. And it certainly isn't madame. She's got matches, and she'd have lit a candle. Besides, she isn't in. Then, who is it? Gracious! a robber perhaps."

And the maid, who had armed herself with a candle to go on a voyage of discovery, turned pale, and halted.

"I hope to goodness he doesn't find me here," she murmured. "When those fellows are caught they don't think twice about sticking a knife into anyone. One sees such things in the papers every day, and I don't want to be murdered. I sha'n't move. He won't think of coming to look in the kitchen, and after he's taken all he wants, he'll go off. I'll let him go without saying anything, and as soon as he's at the bottom of the stairs I'll call out: 'Thieves! for I can't see madame robbed—it would be cowardly of me—and I can prevent it without risking my skin; the man won't dare to come up again to revenge himself on me, and the doorkeeper will stop him. If they'd only kill one another, what a good riddance! Yes, but if that fool of a doorkeeper should just let him out instead of collaring him—he's so stupid—I'd better cry: 'Fire!' all the tenants will come out, and the robber can't escape."

Whilst holding this prudent discourse within herself, Olga kept her ear on the stretch and herself in readiness to act as soon as she should hear the door open and shut. Presently a loud, sharp noise made her start, the noise of a vase which breaks in falling.

"Whatever does that mean?" she thought, in surprise. "Now he's breaking madame's ornaments. What a funny robber! He's not in a hurry to go, it appears, since he's roaming about the drawing-room, instead of decamping with his booty. And what's he groping on the chimney-piece and shelves for? The scamp's after the ornaments too. I'll bet it's the old Sèvres cup that he's broken—or one of the Saxony candlesticks—away goes a hundred louis—and if it goes

on, there'll be an end of all the china. I can't understand it at all. I never heard of such a case, and I don't know what to do—"

She heard nothing more. The carpet, no doubt, deadened the sound of the man's footsteps, who was wandering about on tiptoe amongst Madame Marly's treasures.

Suddenly an idea struck Olga's puzzled brain, an idea which made her start.

"What a fool I am!" she said. "It isn't a robber at all; it's Ernest; the scamp's gone into madame's bedroom—to look at himself in the long glass, he's such a conceited fop—he's found the bottle of port on the table, and drunk it. He can't carry much liquor, and it's made him drunk, and when he's drunk—I know him—he must sleep. He's been snoring on the sofa for the last two hours, and he's just awoke. What a bit of good luck that madame isn't in yet!

"Yes, but she may come in at any moment—not to mention that George might come in too—and if they found Ernest, a nice scrape I should be in. I made a fool of myself sending him here, and there's only just time to pitch him out. I must go to him."

Olga, reassured, took her candle again and went out courageously to put an end to her dear Ernest's nocturnal promenades. She went down the passage which ran into the ante-room, taking care to walk on tiptoe, so that the visitor should not hear her coming, for, at heart, she was not quite sure that it was really her lover.

"It's a funny thing, too, that he should be wandering about like that," she thought. "I can understand him knocking over his candle, and I remember that he had no matches in his pocket to-night—he asked the waiter at the Boule-Noire for some—but what does he want a light at all for? He's only got to go out and shut the door after him, instead of going about smashing things. It's too stupid. It isn't

like Ernest. After all," continued Ernest's loving friend, "perhaps he hasn't got all his senses about him yet. Port wine's strong stuff, and if he's drunk all the bottle—or else he left my three louis in the bedroom and he wants a light to go and look for them; he's afraid I shall scold him, poor dear."

Thus reasoning, Olga had got as far as the ante-room. As a measure of precaution she stopped before going farther, and held her ear to the drawing-room door. This time it was not the sound of overturned furniture or broken china that she heard, but a curious sound, a noise like that of grumbling. The man who was there was talking to himself, and he must have been in a great rage, for he occasionally burst out loud, and then continued his muttered imprecations.

"Who's he swearing at?" wondered the stupefied Olga.

Presently an oath more plainly articulated reached her ears.

"It's not Ernest," she said to herself. "He said '*Sacré-bleu!*' When Ernest swears, he swears more forcibly than that. Then he's what I thought he was at first—a robber—and, if he comes out, he'll find me here and attack me. I won't be such a fool as to wait for him—I'll go back to my bedroom and lock myself in. There! another chair over—and on this side of the room; he's coming this way—now's my time."

Olga had not time to carry out her intention. She had just stood upright, and had not taken a step backwards, when the door, which opened outwards, was violently pushed, and threw her backwards. The shock was such that she dropped her candle. It went out, and the poor girl, plunged suddenly into total darkness, began to cry in a lamentable voice:

"Mercy! don't kill me. I'll let you go, and I won't say anything."

"What's all this? Who are you?" cried an irritated voice. And, at the same time, an iron grasp was laid on the maid.

"Don't hurt me—I swear I won't call out—but, if you don't let me go, I'll call for help."

"Hullo! it's you, Olga?" said the man, who had recognised her voice and language.

"Yes, it's me, and who are you? Gracious! perhaps it's Monsieur George."

"Who on earth else should it be?"

"Oh, sir, how frightened I was! I took you for a robber."

"You've just come home, then?"

"Yes, by the back stairs."

"If you'd come in a little earlier, you'd have prevented me from breaking I don't know how many valuable objects. I've been hunting for matches for the last ten minutes."

"Where's my candle that I dropped?" said Olga. "Oh, here it is. I'll light it in my room. If you will wait, I won't be long, sir. When madame comes in she'll scold me for not leaving a lamp in the ante-room—I'm certain her Sèvres cup's in a thousand pieces—and she was so fond of it."

"Madame? But she is in, and has been in for some time, for she's fast asleep."

"Impossible."

"I tell you she's asleep, and so fast asleep that I couldn't awake her by shaking her arm."

"And all the noise you made just now, knocking over the chairs—?"

"She never moved. It's hardly credible; one might think they'd put opium in her tea at Caro's."

"Good heavens! she can't be poisoned! she should hear us talking, and she doesn't call. I'm goose-skin all over at the very thought of it."

"And I don't feel quite comfortable. Go and fetch a light, quick."

"Yes, sir; but are you sure that no one had been in before you?"

"How should I know? I tell you I haven't been here more than a quarter of an hour. And, if I'd known that I should find Claudine in a lethargy, I shouldn't have come at all. She ought to have told me that she was subject to that kind of thing."

Olga was already at the other end of the passage, and she reappeared almost instantly, carrying a lighted candle, and whispering:

"I should go mad if anything had happened to madame."

George went to take the candle, but Olga narrowly escaped letting it fall once more.

"Blood!" she cried; "you've got blood on your hands!"

"Blood on my hands!" repeated George. "You're mad!"

"Look, then," said Olga, showing a light. "You're up to your cuffs in it."

"So I am," said George. "I can't understand it. Ah! perhaps I cut myself when I broke the cup."

"No, no—look; the blood isn't running, it's in patches."

"So it is; how the deuce can I have got it on me?"

There was a moment's silence. Uneasy, almost frightened, George examined his bloody hands, and seemed to be wondering what was the cause of the phenomenon. Olga, who had turned deadly pale, was trembling so violently that she spilt some drops of grease on Monsieur de Gravigny's cuff.

"Did you say you had touched madame?" she asked, with an effort.

"Yes," cried George, "good heavens! is this blood—hæmorrhage, perhaps—she has lost consciousness—that's why she didn't answer me; quick, Olga, show a light!"

He re-entered the drawing-room hastily. Olga followed

him with reeling steps, but she did not go far. Her strength failed her, and she was obliged to lean on the arm of a sofa, so as not to fall.

"She's dead—she's been murdered," she gasped.

George, who did not lose his head at a trifle, snatched the candle from her hands to run to Madame Marly, who was lying in the adjoining bedroom, and who still gave no sign of life; but the movement he made was so quick, and the draught from the door so strong, that the candle went out. It is often at the most serious moments that ridiculous accidents happen; comedy in drama, according to the formula of the illustrious master of romance. George fired off a volley of oaths this time which might very well have issued from Ernest's mouth.

"Matches, quick!" he cried.

"I haven't any," replied Olga, in a voice choking with fright.

"Go and fetch some. You found some just now."

"I can't—my legs are useless."

"Oh, you're a nuisance! I don't want to go into the bedroom without a light—strange things have been going on here, from what I can make out—and as you don't want me to see them, I'll go down and awake the doorkeeper; he'll go and fetch a policeman if it's necessary. Let me pass," said George, stretching out his arm to find his way in the dark.

"Don't touch me," cried the terrified Olga; "I don't want any blood found on me."

"Go to the devil, and let me get out."

George had already one foot in the ante-room; but Olga, who dreaded the contact of his hands, was not afraid of clinging to him behind. She seized the tail of his overcoat, and gasped out:

"No—you won't go—or I'll go with you."

"I want none of you. Loose me, *sacrébleu!*"

"Stop all alone with madame, who's dead! No—no—never—they'd accuse me—they'd think I killed her."

Olga did not say exactly what she was thinking. A terrible idea had just flashed across her mind. She remembered that her lover had the key of these rooms, where everything seemed to show that a crime had been committed, that he had come in there, and that he had not only visited her bedroom, for the drawing-room also reeked of tobacco. Ernest must have got to the Rue de l'Arcade about half-past twelve, and Ernest had not appeared again, either at the restaurant or at his home.

"If madame has been murdered, it can only be him who did it," said the wretched girl to herself.

She saw Ernest in prison already; she saw herself arrested as an accomplice; she saw the court, La Roquette, the guillotine. She wondered whether she could save her lover and herself from that terrible fate. And she saw that, before all, she must prevent the immediate intervention of the doorkeeper and the police.

"Then you know that she's been murdered?" cried George. "You saw or heard it, then? Now I come to think of it—you were here before I was."

"No, sir, I swear not. I've just come in."

"There's no proof of that, and I begin to think that you've had something to do with it. You wouldn't be so frightened of being accused, if you had nothing to reproach yourself with. I mean to see into this. Follow me, and you can make your explanation before a police commissary."

"I won't go. You shall cut me in pieces before I'll go."

"Oh, I don't want to drag you there by the hair of the head, but I shall lock you up here, and go and fetch him. You'll tell me that you won't stop here, and I suppose you've got a key. How did you come in?"

"By the back stairs."

"Well, I shall go and tell the doorkeeper not to let you leave the house."

George had no trouble in freeing himself from Olga's trembling hands. She felt that it was impossible for her to retain her hold of him, but fear suggested to her a means of preventing him from going to fetch anyone.

"But, sir," she cried, "you don't think of madame—perhaps she's only fainted and wants help—you'd do better to assist me to see to her."

"You're right," said Monsieur de Gravigny, "but—"

"And you forget that if you went to fetch the police, you might be accused too."

"I!"

"Why not? You were here before me, no one saw what you did, and you're covered with blood."

George, who had his hand on the door, started and stopped short.

"I should have no difficulty in clearing myself," he said, "but I won't leave Claudine. If you won't walk, tell me where there are some matches."

"In my room—there, at the end of the passage—but you won't find them; I'll go, on condition that you come with me."

"Go on," said George, taking hold of her arm.

Olga could hardly stand, but she dragged herself as far as her bedroom, and there, after a short search in the dark, she put her hands on the box of matches which she had left under the bronze clock which stood on her chimney-piece, and succeeded, not without difficulty, in lighting the candle again.

Her first movement was to look in the glass, and she saw that Monsieur de Gravigny was as pale as herself.

"Come along now," said he.

"I daren't; take the candle."

"Give it me, but, if you don't come of your own accord, I'll force you."

Olga felt that she must obey, and consented to go.

Madame Marly's bedroom had a door opening into the passage, and the maid pointed out this door to Monsieur de Gravigny, who tried to open it, and found that it was locked on the inside.

"Let's go through the drawing-room," said he, hastening his steps.

The room of which Madame Marly was so proud was in a state of the utmost disorder. Chairs had been knocked over, and the carpet was covered with breakage. The Sèvres bowl and the candelabra had been smashed.

"It looks as if there had been a struggle here," said Olga.

"Some one has been smoking here," growled George. "And it's not the smell of Claudine's Russian cigarettes. It reeks of a pipe."

He did not halt, and entered the bedroom without hesitation. It was open; Olga was a short distance behind, but she was following him.

The bed was in the middle of the room, a large bed in the Louis XIV. style, with posts and a canopy, and the hangings drawn back revealed the pale face of Madame Marly resting on the lace-trimmed pillow. The body was covered up to the neck by an eiderdown quilt. One arm hung motionless and stiff. A book which the hand had been holding had fallen on the bear-skin at the bedside. One would have imagined that Claudine had gone to sleep in the act of reading.

George called her by name, and, as she did not move, he rushed towards her.

"Ah!" groaned Olga, "it's true then—she's been murdered."

A cry of horror answered her, and George recoiled from a terrible spectacle.

The sheets were stained with red patches; Claudine, her face turned towards her lover, her eyes open, seemed to be looking at him. The blood was still flowing drop by drop from a wound in the throat, between the ear and the collar-bone. A weapon must have severed the carotid artery.

"Horrible!" muttered George de Gravigny.

"My poor mistress! What a dreadful thing! No, I can't believe she's dead."

"She's been murdered with one blow—whilst she was asleep. Who can have done it?"

"Ah! the villain! the murderer!—if I only knew him!"

"I know him," cried George; "and you know him too, wretched creature! He's your lover."

"My lover!" repeated the terrified girl; "I don't know what you mean. I haven't got a lover."

"You lie," said George, looking fixedly at her; "your lover's name is Ernest. He's a scamp of the worst description. You keep him. He passed the evening with you at a dance. You left together at midnight. You gave him the key of these rooms, telling him to come and rejoin you in some den or other, where you waited for him. He killed your mistress, and you are his accomplice."

George had just recollected a conversation overheard at the club before cards began. A Monsieur Charles Deshaies had related in his presence his excursion to the Boule-Noire, and what he had seen and heard on coming out.

"It isn't true," said Olga, in a choking voice.

Gravigny seized her by the arm, dragged her into the drawing-room and flung her into a chair.

"Confess, wretch," he cried, after having placed his candle on the chimney-piece. "Confess, for I can confound you if you persist in denying. I can find a witness who

was present when you sent that vile scamp to the Rue de l'Arcade—a witness who knows you perfectly well, for he was Armande's lover when you were her servant, before coming to Madame Marly—a witness who spoke to you this evening—"

"Monsieur Charles!"

The name escaped her lips, and George continued violently:

"Then you admit it now?"

"Yes," stammered the miserable Olga; "I admit I gave Ernest the key—I didn't try to conceal it—all his friends were there—if I had wanted to do wrong I should have gone to work differently."

"It matters little to me whether you were an accomplice or not. It was you who provided him with the means of committing an abominable crime. You are responsible for Claudine's death, and I won't spare you. Get up, wretch, and follow me to the commissary, or if not—"

"Monsieur George—I entreat you—don't shout—you'll ruin us all—and I'm innocent, I swear. I who loved madame so, I should—no, you can't think that—I was wrong to send Ernest—I had left my money in my room, and we wanted to have supper. Yes, I was wrong, and I'm punished for it—I ought to have come with him—and I'll never believe he murdered madame. Why should he kill her?—he knew she was kind to me, and that by stopping with her I could improve my position—"

"He murdered her in order to rob her."

"Nothing has been stolen. The strong-box hasn't been opened. When I came in I looked at the rosewood box where madame kept her valuables. It hasn't been touched."

"The villain didn't have time to force it. You had told him that I was coming. He was satisfied with carrying off the jewellery and money that Claudine had by her and hadn't locked up before going to bed."

"I saw one of her rings shining on the floor. If I only had the courage to go into her bedroom, I'm certain I should find all—even the six thousand francs which she had to draw yesterday."

George started. He remembered that the six thousand francs were in his pocket-book, and that no one had seen Madame Marly give them to him in the Café Anglais.

"If this girl knew that," he thought, "she might accuse me in order to save the scoundrel who lives on her. I must make an end of this."

"And listen, sir," resumed Olga. "Now I'm certain that it wasn't Ernest. He has his faults, I admit, but he's not a murderer."

"You can defend him before the commissary; get up, I tell you."

"And supposing I won't come," said Olga, tossing her head.

"I shall go and fetch somebody who'll force you to."

"So you said before, but I defy you to do it."

"What! you dare to be insolent!"

"There's no insolence about it. And I say this, that if you call anyone I'll accuse you, I'll say that no one can have murdered madame but you. And they'll believe me, when I swear I found you rushing about the drawing-room like a madman; when I swear you were coming out of the room where you had done the deed—those who hear me will only have to look at your hands."

At this, George, who was already white, became livid, and Olga, who was watching his face, continued boldly:

"You think that a judge wouldn't hesitate between you and my lover; that he'd never dream of accusing the Viscount de Gravigny, and that Ernest would be doomed in advance, because of what he is—because he does no work, and because he accepts presents from me. Well, what then?

I've a right to do it, and that's no one's business. And you —do you work? You've no money, as you've spent it all— that's well known. All Paris knows you're ruined and that no woman grows rich on you. Madame has never given you anything—that's possible—you've only known her since yesterday—but some day or other you wouldn't have made any bones about borrowing some money of her, after losing at cards. And who knows, indeed, whether she hasn't lent you some already—whether the notes that she took yesterday will be found again: perhaps they went into your pockets."

"Enough!" cried George, in a voice choking with passion.

Olga had risen and was speaking with vehemence. She saw that she held Claudine's lover, and she hastened to profit by the advantage which the viscount's peculiar position gave her.

"Believe me," said she, boldly, "you'll gain nothing by denouncing us; I shall be arrested, that's certain, and Ernest too; but the same thing will happen to you. If it isn't to-night it'll be to-morrow, or else there's no justice in this world, for all I can do against you I will, and you'll never prove that you were not in madame's house and covered with blood."

George felt that she was right and could find no reply; he was choking with rage.

"If you were willing," resumed Olga, "no one need ever know that you had set foot here to-night. The doorkeeper did not see you come in, and he did not inquire your name, did he?"

"No," said George, shortly.

"Well, what prevents you from going as you came? Do you think I should say I had seen you? I promise you that I should be only too glad to get out of the scrape in the same way, and I shouldn't take long about it either.

Madame gave me leave to sleep out, and when I have that leave I always take advantage of it. The doorkeeper will never dream that I've been in. And I know where to go; I shall go and look for Ernest; I shall find him—and listen, this will prove to you that I don't believe that he did the deed—if I thought he'd murdered madame, I'd rather throw myself in the Seine than go near him."

"But you must come back here to-morrow morning."

"I'll arrange so as not to be the first. The cook is sleeping out and she'll come home early, so as to go to market. She'll see I'm not here."

"But sooner or later you'll be questioned."

"I shall say I know nothing, and it will be the truth, and there'll be no need for me to pretend to be cut up about madame—if you only knew how I felt—to have seen her like that—and to think she's lying there. I should have been far away now, if you hadn't prevented me. And you, Monsieur George," continued Olga, lowering her voice, "doesn't it affect you to stay here so near a corpse? If she'd only had a breath of life left in her when we went into her room, I shouldn't have thought of myself or Ernest—I should have roused the whole house to fetch a doctor—but no—she was cold already."

"She must have been struck dead—as if the blow had pierced her heart. The hand that struck her chose the spot well and didn't hesitate."

"Poor woman! at least she didn't suffer, and if we were accused of killing her, it wouldn't bring her to life again. So you see, Monsieur George, if it was all to fall on Ernest and me, if no one was to suspect you, it wouldn't be any the less unpleasant. How would you like to see your name in the papers?—they'll all be full of the crime of the Rue de l'Arcade—madame was so well known, and the affair will make such a noise, you'll have to go ten times, twenty

times, before the magistrate; and, besides, your enemies—you must have some—wouldn't they be pleased to hear that you're mixed up in a crime! Monsieur Salers, for instance. Why, he'd give ten thousand francs for it to happen."

This name, artfully introduced by Olga, put an end to George's hesitation.

"Very well," said he, "I'll let you go, and I'll go too. It's understood that we haven't seen one another since yesterday morning. If ever you say a word about our meeting here to-night, I promise you you'll regret it."

"I'll be as mute as the grave," said Olga.

And without even taking time to put out the candle which was burning on the chimney-piece, she rushed to the door and descended the stairs. George followed close after her. Olga knocked at the window of the doorkeeper's lodge. The latter, half awake, drew the cord, without asking who was there.

Ten seconds afterwards the last lover and the last maid of Claudine Marly were in the street, and hastened to separate from one another.

VII.

Fernand Daubrac had not played the Café Bignon comedy for the sole reason of procuring four thousand francs for a needy friend. George de Gravigny had owed him that sum for the last two months, and the chance was a good one for demanding the payment of an old debt. But Daubrac had other reasons. He believed in George's luck. He believed above all in the advantage of coolness and boldness to a veteran gambler, and he had good hopes of seeing his capital vastly increased in the hands of the skilful viscount, who would that evening have a chance of winning to any amount. Daubrac had constituted himself his debtor's partner. His disinterestedness was in reality a speculation, and this speculation could not cost him much, for he only ran the risk of losing half of a very doubtful debt.

Daubrac was a clever man. For the last fifteen years he had lived in very decent style, although he was not known to possess land, houses, or funded property; he had no situation and did nothing, or at least he appeared to do nothing. He was neither in trade nor business. He was to be seen on the Bourse occasionally, on big days, when sudden rises and falls enabled well-informed folks to realise handsome profits on the spot; but he was not a broker by profession.

And never had this mysterious existence given an opportunity for scandal. Daubrac paid his tradesmen and debts of honour punctually. Daubrac owed no man anything,

and invariably conducted himself as a gentleman. There were no queer stories about him, and his reputation had never been attacked. The police commissary of his neighbourhood would have given him a certificate of good conduct and morals just as willingly as to the most sober citizen. And everyone received him, although no one could tell whence he came when he appeared suddenly in the full swing of Paris life. Spiteful people said that he owed his advancement to the ladies, and, to tell the truth, he knew them all; but he had never advertised any woman as his mistress, any more than he had his political opinions. He was even ready enough to boast that he had none, and he posed not less as a sceptic in matters affecting the heart.

A good companion, moreover; always ready for anything, full of resource, a pleasant talker, prompt in repartee, and frechanded, fighting if necessary, gifted with imperturbable coolness and absolutely without prejudices.

George de Gravigny had perhaps not much esteem for him, but he was very fond of his company, and knew him better than most of his friends. He had come to the conclusion that this young fellow, who was destitute of scruples and plentifully provided with tact, lived on ingenious ideas, as others live on the product of their estates. These ideas thrive in Paris as orange-trees thrive in Provence, and they are more profitable; George knew something about that. Only the day before, Daubrac had had one which had drawn two hundred louis from the old count's pocket—two hundred louis which might have been the starting-point of a large fortune, if Prince Lounine had had fewer eights and nines at baccarat.

Daubrac had almost reckoned on this quickly-made fortune. He thought of it for a long time, before going to bed and after meeting George at the corner of the Rue de l'Arcade. He went so far as to dream of it, and, on waking,

his first thought was to go and see what had happened at the club. He lived in the Boulevard Malesherbes, not far from the Rue Neuve-des-Mathurins, where dwelt Gravigny. He got up, dressed, and went out at about nine o'clock, fully expecting to find his partner in bed.

To his great surprise he learnt from the doorkeeper that he had come in about three o'clock, but that after stopping in his room for twenty minutes he had gone out again and had not returned since.

This unexpected news made Daubrac feel uncomfortable and caused him to embark in various conjectures. He went off again, wondering whether this nocturnal visit were a good sign or not. There were reasons both for and against. George might have left the card-table just as well because he was winning as because he was losing. Had he won, he might have determined to place his gains in safety. Had he lost, he might also have fled, from lack of money to continue. That he had withdrawn before the game was over was very probable, for it always lasted till daybreak and sometimes even later. He could come to no certain conclusion on the subject.

And what was to be thought of the singular behaviour of a gambler, who, enriched or ruined, had only returned home for an instant and decamped again in the middle of the night?

"If he had had any money in his desk," said Daubrac to himself, "I could imagine that, having lost what he had, he had come to fetch a fresh supply; but I know for certain that he hadn't a sou more than his uncle's four thousand francs; if he lost that, he surely couldn't have thought of replacing them by hunting in his drawers, for he knew they were empty. Then why didn't he stop in, and where the deuce has he gone? To commit suicide, after having lost on credit? No, they only play for ready money—and, then,

it's only fools who commit suicide, and Gravigny has too much sense to make an end of himself like that. To fly to Belgium with enormous winnings, in order to avoid sharing with me? He's incapable of playing such a trick, and besides it would have been simpler to deny the partnership. I can't understand it at all."

Quite at a loss for an explanation, Daubrac thought for a moment of going on to the club, in order to find out how the game had ended; but he soon recollected that he should find no one there. The clubs are deserted during the morning; gamblers are night-birds who go to bed when workers are getting up, unless by chance an exceptionally prolonged game forces them to see broad day-light.

Finally Daubrac, who was walking aimlessly along, was on the point of taking his way home in despair, when the recollection of an incident of the night before occurred to him.

"I met him about twelve o'clock at the corner of the Rue de l'Arcade," he muttered, "close to where the Marly lives; when I jokingly asked him whether he was her lover, he answered me with an embarrassed air—and in the morning he had asked me a heap of questions about her. In fact, he almost said that he had given up his marchioness—and I remember how they were saying on the Bourse that Paul Salers had given Claudine up. It's all clear. He took her away from Salers; and that's the reason he was so annoyed that Salers was at the restaurant when I played the creditor comedy—and I'll bet ten louis to a franc that he went there to sleep. But why didn't he go straight there from the club? That's what I can't make out. There are several ways of explaining. Gravigny is very careful in his dress, and nothing soils the cuffs like playing cards. He must have wanted to change his linen before presenting himself at his fair one's. Or again, he may have thought

it best to go and put his winnings in safety, instead of carrying them about with him. *Parbleu!* I should infinitely prefer that that should be his motive for the short appearance at home.

"But however it is," concluded Daubrac, "I must know this morning how things stand. Claudine knows me, and she's a good sort. If I'm wrong she won't be angry with me, and if, on the contrary, Gravigny's there, he won't be annoyed at me coming to find out the results of our partnership. But I must take care to proceed discreetly, in case some one else should be there. It's half-past nine. The lady's in bed still, but the maid must be up, and it so happens I know her too. She used to be with Armande."

Thus reasoning, Daubrac had arrived at the corner of the Rue de l'Arcade, which crosses the Rue Neuve-des-Mathurins. He hastened his step and did not take three minutes to traverse the short distance which separated him from the house where he fondly hoped to unearth George de Gravigny.

There was a small crowd of people in front of the gate, but Daubrac was too much occupied to take any notice of the fact. He passed by without listening to the conversation of these loafers and went straight to the lodge to ask on what floor Madame Marly lived. The porter was not there and the lodge was closed. Daubrac recollected then that Claudine lived on the first floor. He had seen her occasionally leaning on the balcony whilst Paul Salers was smoking a cigar in the open air during the hot summer evenings. And, certain of this, he ascended the stairs.

He was rather surprised to meet two policemen at the bottom, but he did not stop to wonder why they were there, and he passed without noticing that they looked very hard at him.

On the first floor his astonishment increased. The door

was open and voices could be heard. He seemed even to hear groans.

Quite at a loss, he pushed the door and found himself face to face with two somewhat evil-looking individuals, who asked him what he wanted. Hardly had he pronounced, in reply to them, the name of Madame Marly, than one of the two hastily banged the door, whilst the other sidled close up to him.

"If Madame Marly is not at home, I'll go," said Daubrac quickly, not being anxious to prolong an interview with two men whose appearance he did not like at all.

"Not before speaking to someone," replied one of the individuals who had mounted guard over him.

"That's useless, I only came to see Madame Marly."

"Go in there," replied the other ruffian, pushing the unfortunate visitor into a boudoir which communicated with the drawing-room, on the opposite side to where the bedroom was.

Daubrac, dumbfounded, did not attempt to resist, and the door by which he entered shut behind him.

This was the first time that it had happened to him to be received in this fashion on presenting himself at an "irregular's." He had a good name in that class of society, and the maids always greeted him kindly. He was asked in at private doors, madame was informed at once, and madame did not disdain to disturb herself to come and welcome him. But instead of his old acquaintance Olga, he encountered two rogues who seemed to be on guard there, like soldiers at the door of an officer whose colonel has put him under strict arrest.

"What does it mean?" thought Daubrac. "Has Claudine got the bailiffs in already? Those fellows look as if they had come to seize. No, it's impossible; Claudine hasn't got to that yet. Salers has only just left her—if indeed he

has left her, for the information I had wasn't very clear—it's only a Bourse story, and they spread such a lot of false reports there. No matter, I'm sorry I came here. There's certainly something out of the way going on. The place is full of people, and it seems one can't go out when one likes. The Marly's rooms are transformed into a mouse-trap. And I was a fool to think I should find George here. And yet there is someone, for one of those fellows said that they wanted to speak to me—but who? I'll be hanged if I know."

Daubrac's reflections were interrupted by the entry of a man who came out of the drawing-room, and who had a better appearance than the two sentinels in shabby overcoats, a man whose face was not unknown to him, although he could not remember where he had seen it before.

This individual had not, either, the appearance of a lover of Claudine, and Daubrac on seeing him was relieved of a feeling of uneasiness that he had felt. He had wondered for an instant whether he had not to deal with a successor to Paul Salers, an ill-tempered successor who might have objected to a stranger presenting himself at an hour when ladies are not in the habit of receiving any but their intimate friends.

"Your name, sir?" asked, without further preamble, this new comer, who possessed a severe, not to say a repelling, face.

"To whom have I the honour of speaking?" asked in his turn Fernand Daubrac, who was not easily abashed.

"I am a commissary of police."

"Of this district? Then, you know me, sir; I thought I had seen you before. Three months ago I lodged a complaint against my servant, who had stolen a ring; I was in your office several times, and you came to my house as well —in the Boulevard Malesherbes—Monsieur Daubrac."

"Yes, I remember the case; and now your face comes back to me."

"And I have reason to preserve a pleasant recollection of our relations. I have to thank you for recovering an object which I was very fond of, so I am very glad to meet you here, and the more so that I was far from expecting it. I came to see Madame Marly, and I was received by two men who made me come in here—almost in spite of myself."

"You have relations with Madame Marly?"

"Relations—well, that depends on what meaning you attach to the word. I have known her for a long time—as I know many women of her class, I may say all, or almost all—but I am not and never have been her lover."

"And you came to see her at ten o'clock in the morning!"

"I admit that the time is a peculiar one; but I have a reason."

"But you must have known that she would not be alone?"

"Certainly; but the case is this. I thought that I should find a friend of mine here; I shouldn't have come here on chance, and I counted on learning from her maid. Olga would have told me who was here."

"Oh, you know her name!"

"And she knows mine, I can assure you. I used to see her very often when she was in the service of a certain Armande—a very fashionable lady, of whom you have no doubt heard."

"I shall have to ask you presently what your opinion is of this Olga's morals, but first of all—"

"Oh, her morals leave something to be desired, I'm afraid," said Daubrac, laughing; "but she has the reputation of being respectable, amongst the class with whom she lives. Armande often trusted her with large sums of money and valuable jewellery, and she had never the least reason to find fault with her. Only, if I remember rightly, Olga has a

weakness for a certain class of gentlemen—those who go in for making conquests."

"Well, we'll talk about that presently. Tell me now what is the name of the friend whom you came to look for here."

"George de Gravigny—Viscount George de Gravigny, nephew of the old Count de Gravigny, who used to race—"

"And who has, I believe, a large fortune?"

"About three hundred thousand francs a year."

"Is your friend his heir?"

"The count has no children."

"But he might disinherit his nephew. Is this nephew rich?"

"Not now."

"And yet he's the lover of Madame Marly, who spends a good deal."

"There are several ways of being a gay lady's lover. Madame Marly was kept, until a few days ago, by a gentleman very well known on the Bourse."

"And his name is—?"

"Paul Salers."

"Very well. I know. Then Monsieur de Gravigny has taken his place quite recently?"

"I can't say."

"Excuse me—but, since you expected to find him here this morning—"

"I thought he might be here, but I wasn't sure. He's naturally very reserved, and he never talks to me of his mistresses, although I am very intimate with him. Last night I met him by chance in the Rue de l'Arcade, close to Claudine's house, and I fancied he had come out of it. He had been asking me about the lady during the day, and as he doesn't trouble himself much about the ladies of the *demi-monde*, I had concluded that he had started a passing acquaintance with her."

"And this prompted you to come and look for him here?"

"Not exactly. I had been to his place first."

"And there you had learnt that he had slept out?"

"Yes—that is to say, I was told that he had gone home about three o'clock, and had gone out again almost immediately. I knew that he had passed a part of the night at his club. I thought that after having put his money in his desk, as a measure of precaution, or having changed his linen, he had gone to Madame Marly's, who was expecting him—it was only a supposition on my part; but as he lives in the Rue Neuve-des-Mathurins, close to the Rue de l'Arcade, I came on here so as to find out the truth. And I can see I've had my labour for my pains, for George is evidently not here. So I'll go, if you'll allow me."

"Monsieur de Gravigny plays cards, does he not?"

"Oh, yes; and he's generally very lucky. I must confess that the reason why I wanted to see him this morning was, that there was some heavy play last night, and I was in partnership with him. We had each invested two thousand francs, with which we hoped to break a Russian prince's bank. And I was in a hurry to know whether my money had fructified in my friend's hands."

"I thank you for your information, sir," said the commissary, gravely; "I shall have some more questions to ask you, and as chance has brought you here, may I ask you to remain till I have finished."

"Excuse me, sir," asked Daubrac, more and more astonished, "but what can have brought you here?"

"She was murdered last night," replied the commissary, looking fixedly into Daubrac's eyes.

"Murdered!" repeated Daubrac, "Claudine murdered! and by whom, good heavens! She hadn't an enemy."

"She had money, though, and many people knew it,"

said the commissary, without taking his eyes off his questioner.

"Then you believe that some one killed her for her money?"

"I believe nothing; I am on the look-out."

"And the crime was committed during the past night?"

"Yes, probably between two and three o'clock."

"And I thought George had come to sleep here! But, indeed, it's to be regretted that he didn't; he might have saved poor Claudine."

"Are you quite certain, sir, that he did not come?" asked the commissary, after a pause.

It was said in such a tone that Daubrac turned pale. He began to comprehend.

"Quite certain—no," he stammered. "I left Gravigny just before twelve o'clock—he was going to the club—and I haven't seen him since. But I have no reason to believe that he passed the night at Madame Marly's; I don't even know that he was her lover; I might have thought it, but I see that I was mistaken."

"That will be inquired into. I'll ask Monsieur Salers—and others."

"But, sir, even if this unfortunate woman had been Monsieur Gravigny's mistress, you wouldn't accuse a man whose position places him above suspicion."

"You have just told me yourself that Monsieur de Gravigny is ruined, and that he gambles."

This reply put Daubrac out of countenance. He perceived somewhat late in the day, that all he had just said and done might tell against a man whom he believed capable of many things, but not of committing a terrible crime, not of murdering a mistress in order to rob her. And he asked himself anxiously how he should make amends for his imprudence.

"Listen to me, sir," said the commissary, coldly. "I have never heard anything against you, and I don't wish to draw you into this, even indirectly. The visit you have paid here, moreover, proves that you were not aware of what had been going on. But you will readily understand that it is impossible not to take note of the information with which you have just furnished me—involuntarily. I accuse no one as yet. I'm trying to throw light on the case, and you may be able to help me to find the culprit. These are the facts. It is as well you should know them, for I shall have to interrogate you on certain points which I want to clear up first of all. .

"This morning at eight o'clock Madame Marly's cook came in from the market. She does not sleep in the apartments, and she was astonished not to see here the maid, who comes every morning at that time to give the orders for breakfast. She looked for her; did not find her; and in searching for her she noticed that the drawing-room door was open, and that the furniture was in disorder. Chairs had been thrown over, and a china bowl broken, of which the pieces remained on the floor. Upon this she went to the bedroom, the door of which was open; she looked, and saw her mistress dead. Madame Marly had been stabbed in her bed. The terrified cook rushed out, ran downstairs to call the porter, and at the bottom she met the maid coming in—this Olga, whom you know."

"Where was she coming from, then?" asked Daubrac quickly, seized by suspicion.

"She had slept out—with her mistress's leave. On hearing that Madame Marly had been murdered, she had a kind of hysterical attack. They came to fetch me at once, and I arrived before anyone had set foot in the room. I at once took the precaution, usual in such cases, of placing detectives at the door, with orders to allow those who came to

enter, but not to let them go out again. Up to the present you are the only one."

"But of course you have questioned this girl—this Olga?"

"I began by doing that. She stated that Madame Marly went out shortly before seven, to go and dine at a restaurant."

"With whom?"

"She professes not to know, and I believe she is lying. According to her, Madame Marly was to go after dinner to one of her friends, where she was invited to pass the evening—to a Madame Caroline Lebarbier's—"

"All Paris knows her. You can find out from her whether Claudine arrived alone and how long she stayed."

"Caroline Lebarbier will be summoned before a magistrate to-morrow—which one I don't yet know—I've only just given the authorities information. The maid states that her mistress would come home late—at two o'clock, she says, perhaps at three."

"That's quite likely. They play cards at Caroline's."

"The doctor, who has just made an examination of the body, thinks that seven hours have elapsed since death. So his calculation agrees with the girl's statement."

"Not exactly, I think; for if Claudine came home at two, she probably took some time to get ready for bed, and probably she did not go to sleep at once; now I suppose there's no doubt the murderer surprised her in her sleep—"

"No. She was reading. The book that she had in her hand fell at the foot of the bed. The deed was done with an amount of audacity and sureness truly extraordinary. The murderer must have had a key to the rooms."

"That's a clue."

"A false key, perhaps. All thieves have them. He crossed the drawing-room and entered the bedroom without

making the least noise. There are carpets everywhere which deaden the sound of footsteps. Madame Marly was reading in bed, lying on her side, with her back to the door. She sat up when the murderer was almost touching her. He struck her at the base of the neck, just above the right collar-bone, and killed her on the spot. She fell dead, her head on the pillow, one arm hanging out of bed—"

"From the stab of a knife?"

"No; of a stiletto, a very thin and sharp blade—something like a small dagger. The weapon has not been found, moreover, and the murderer has left no trace behind him. He must have taken his precautions and calculated everything in advance."

"But I suppose he left some traces of his presence? He forced the strong-box?—Claudine probably had one?"

"The strong-box is intact. On opening it we shall see whether Madame Marly, before going to bed, locked up the jewellery she had been wearing."

"If nothing has been stolen the motive must have been revenge, and just now you thought the contrary."

"I haven't yet come to any conclusion as to the motive of the crime, but I have no doubt that it was committed by some one who had a knowledge of Madame Marly's habits."

"Excuse me, sir, if I venture to mention a fact which has just struck me. The drawing-room furniture was disarranged, and a bowl or cup was broken, so there must have been a struggle between the murderer and his victim."

"Not at all. I imagine that, in striking, the murderer extinguished the candle which was burning at the bedside, and that in crossing the drawing-room in the darkness, in order to make his way out, he knocked over the chairs and sofas."

"That is probable," said Daubrac, thoughtfully.

"And now, sir, you won't be surprised that I am anxious

to examine Monsieur de Gravigny as soon as possible, for possibly he was—as you say yourself—Madame Marly's lover, and he, after going home before three o'clock, left immediately afterwards, as you again say. Where do you suppose that he is now?"

"I swear to you, sir, that I haven't the least idea. Gravigny is a very capricious and very mysterious fellow. Perhaps he had an appointment with a woman. I don't know his mistresses, but I know he had some."

"You don't think he went back to the club, where cards were going on?"

"They must have been over long ago. But we could find that out."

"That is what I am going to do. But, in the meantime, be good enough to tell me what you know about this maid. She has lovers, and those lovers are of the worst stamp?"

"That's possible—probable even—but—"

"Would you repeat that in her presence?"

"Certainly," replied Daubrac; "I will retract nothing of what I have said to you. But I may say now that I have never had any proof that Olga had dealings with professional thieves. Formerly it was said she used to pick up her lovers at the dances. But between that and introducing a murderer into her mistress's house there is a wide difference."

"No doubt," replied the commissary; "but it is none the less important to know who are her friends and what she was doing last night. If I were to discover that she went to meet a suspicious character and she could not give a satisfactory explanation of how her time was employed, I should be very much inclined to think that she had something to do with this affair. And it would not be impossible that, without being an accomplice, she might have furthered the crime by furnishing the murderer with the means of getting in here—by giving him the key, for instance."

"To tell the truth, I remember Armande always reproached her with allowing herself to be influenced by her lovers."

"If I could collect sufficient proofs against her or against one of her friends, I should pursue my investigations in that quarter, and your friend Monsieur de Gravigny would not be troubled at all."

"True," said Daubrac, delighted to look at things in this light. "And you can depend, sir, that I shall do my best to second you, if you are of opinion that my presence and my statements are of any use to make Olga confess. Is she here?"

"She is in the drawing-room and I sha'n't allow her to go out without good reason. She is being watched unknown to herself. The cook and the doorkeeper are also being looked after, the one in her kitchen and the other in his lodge. They are the only witnesses that I have at present, but I am going to send for Monsieur de Gravigny."

"Excuse me, sir, but you said just now that—"

"That I was willing to throw up the investigation so far as he is concerned. But I must examine him, and it is to his interest that I should see him as soon as possible, so that his name will not have to figure in the proceedings. Where do you think he is to be found at this moment?"

"Upon my word, sir, I cannot say. It's possible he may have gone home again since I was there. There is a bare chance that he may have returned to the club."

"I've an intelligent man here, who will go and look for him wherever you think it is possible he may be, and bring him here if he meets him. Don't you think, sir, that in order to spare Monsieur de Gravigny the unpleasantness of being accosted by a detective, whom he would recognise as such, it would be better that the man should tell him that he came from you?"

"An excellent idea. I can even write him a note, if you like, which your man can give him."

"Yes, that would be better; on condition, of course, that your note should give no hint as to what is going on."

"I'll show it to you," said Daubrac, taking from his pocket a gold pencil-case and an elegant note-book, from which he tore a leaf, and wrote a message in the following pressing terms: "Come quick; I must see you immediately. Accompany the bearer of this note. He knows where I am."

"Very good," said the commissary, after having read it; "I'll give my messenger his instructions, and I can answer for it that the commission will be well executed."

Having said this, he left Daubrac and went and conferred in the passage with one of his men, returning almost at once.

"Now sir," said he, "will you follow me? The time has come to question this girl. I have not yet put her under a serious examination, for I had to attend to the medical man first, and besides, she was in such a state of mind from grief that I could get nothing out of her—a state of mind that was too overdone to be sincere."

"I heard sobs and cries as I came in."

"She has had time to get calm. Come along, sir."

"I am at your orders; but Olga will be so surprised to see me that I had better invent some excuse to explain my presence here."

"I'll undertake that; you will only have to let me speak, and answer me when I ask you any question."

There was nothing for Daubrac but to follow the commissary into the drawing-room, and this he did. Olga was lying on a sofa, and hiding her face in her hands. It was necessary to call her by name to make her show her face, bathed in tears. She rose quickly, and started back in sur-

prise on seeing Daubrac, whom she recognised at once. She did not appear uneasy, however, but a certain look, difficult to define, came over her face. A close observer would have seen in it a feeling of disquietude which she was trying to conceal.

"This gentleman, whom you have seen before, has come to speak to Madame Marly," said the commissary. "He is as much grieved as you at the misfortune which has happened, and he has given me a very good account of you. He will be very glad to hear what you have to say, and I see no objection to that. So don't be alarmed; sit down and let us talk."

Olga did not take advantage of the permission which the magistrate had given her, probably to make her think that he did not look upon her as a guilty party. She remained standing, with her back towards the room in which poor Claudine's bleeding corpse was lying; she dried her tears, and said in a broken voice:

"Monsieur Daubrac has known me for a long time; he used often to come to Madame Armande's, but since I have been with poor Madame Marly I have had no chance of speaking to him. I'm very glad he remembers me, because—"

"I never forget anything or anyone," interrupted George's friend, "and I could tell you the exact date when you left Armande's service, the names of the people who used to visit her when you were there, and even that of the lover who used to wait for you in the Boulevard de la Madeleine."

"Oh, sir, how can you talk of such things here? You don't think that beyond that door—luckily it's shut—there is a dead body."

"But we must talk of them," said the commissary, giving Daubrac an approving look, as if to thank him for the change which he had brought about. "I do not suspect

you, but my duty is to gather information as to the habits and acquaintances of all those who had to do with Madame Marly. I am therefore obliged to ask you your lover's name. Fear nothing. It isn't for the purpose of reproaching you for having one."

"His name is Ernest Maubert," replied Olga, without hesitation.

"And what is his occupation?"

"An engraver on glass."

"Where does he live?"

"107 Boulevard de Clichy.'

"In a lodging-house?"

"Of course. He's not rich, and business is bad."

All these replies were readily given. Olga had evidently foreseen the examination, and had determined to tell no lies if she could help it.

"Then you help him a bit?" resumed the commissary.

"I have to," said Olga, simply.

"You are outspoken, and quite right too, for now that I have confidence in you I sha'n't question you much further. Did your mistress often allow you to sleep out?"

"Not very often. About three or four times a month."

"But she didn't object to your lover coming here to see you?"

"She didn't like it much."

"But he came all the same, didn't he?"

"Not often. I didn't want to vex madame."

"I understand that. So you made up for it when you had leave to stop out all night. Yesterday, for instance, you went to meet Ernest Maubert?"

"Yes, sir; we had dinner in a little restaurant in the Rue de Laval, and we went together to the Bal de la Boule-Noire—"

"Which closes at twelve, I believe."

"We left shortly before the end."

"And you went home to Ernest's?"

"No, I should tell a lie if I said that, and I've determined to tell nothing but the truth. Only I did not want to get anybody into trouble."

"Go on; I've nothing to do with anything but Madame Marly's death."

"Well, sir, Ernest has one fault—he's a gambler—and he knows a place where they play every night till four o'clock—in the Boulevard de la Chapelle."

"I know it. The place is tolerated because it's under police supervision."

"Then it's known that my lover and I went there on leaving the Boule-Noire, and that we left when the proprietor put us out; Ernest lost sixty francs there."

"So neither you nor he came back here last night?"

"Unfortunately not, sir; for if I'd been here the scoundrel who did the deed would have killed me before touching madame."

"Excuse me, M. Commissary," said Daubrac all at once, "did you notice that poor-looking brass candlestick on the drawing-room chimney-piece? Don't you think that the murderer must have left it there?"

"Candlestick!" repeated the commissary; "I hadn't noticed it, but it appears to me in truth as if it had been put there by the murderer. Receive my compliments, sir. Such observance does honour to your sagacity."

Olga said nothing, but her face changed. She had recognised the candle which had served her to light George, and she repented bitterly having left it on the chimney-piece on flying with Monsieur de Gravigny.

"You need not turn pale," said the commissary to her, who had not taken his eyes off her. "We don't think it was you who gave it to the murderer, and you can tell us

where it belongs. Madame Marly certainly did not make use of it, and this is the first time that it has been in that place; but you must have used it sometimes. It looks to me like a kitchen candlestick. Look at it, my girl, and tell us what you think."

Olga obeyed, much against her will, and her hands trembled as she touched the accusing object.

"No," she stammered, "the kitchen ones are in brass and this is bronzed."

"If it stood on a chimney-piece, there must be two, and the other will turn up," said Daubrac.

The terrified girl felt the danger, and fear suggested to her a means of averting it.

"Oh," she cried, "it's one of two that were in my room—the wretch went there first. If he had found me, I should have been settled. But I should have screamed. Madame would have awoke, and then she wouldn't have been killed."

"Unless the man had killed both of you. He was a strong villain, to judge by the way he committed the crime. But, tell me, is your room far from Madame Marly's?"

"No, sir, but not very near, either. It's there, at the end of the passage, which runs almost the whole way round. It's next to the kitchen."

"And one can walk into it from off the backstairs?"

"Yes, sir."

"If the murderer used those stairs, I can understand that he opened the first door before him. But I don't quite see why he should want a light. He would, on the contrary, profit by the darkness to glide unseen into Madame Marly's bedroom."

"And it isn't easy to understand either how, in escaping, he knocked over chairs, and even vases," said Daubrac, "for look, the candle wasn't blown out; it burned down to the end."

"What a fool I must have been not to blow it out!" thought Olga.

"That's right," said the commissary, "and I begin to think that the murderer did not go to work as I thought at first. The whole scene must be gone over again. But we shall get back to that. I'm going to examine the doorkeeper now. It's important to fix the exact time when Madame Marly came in, and to know who came in after her—or even before her, for the murderer may have hidden himself here and waited for her."

Olga with difficulty concealed a nervous start on seeing the commissary go and open the anteroom door and give some orders to the detectives who were there.

"I can understand why you are so sorry for having slept out," said Daubrac to her.

"I am sorry that I wasn't able to defend madame, but that's all I'm sorry for," replied the maid, giving him a look which was anything but a tender one.

The interference of this old friend of Armande's appeared to her ill-omened. She did not know that he was intimate with George de Gravigny, and she wondered whether he had not come there expressly to implicate her, for she had never seen him with her mistress. And she did not feel very comfortable as to the result of the doorkeeper's evidence, for Ernest was not at all a favourite of his. This redoubtable individual appeared almost immediately. He was a tall, lean personage, not very old, and affecting a pompous manner, as beseems the lawful guardian of a respectable house. He bowed politely to the commissary and Daubrac, but he pretended to be looking in another direction, so as not to see Olga.

"You know all the tenants in this house?" asked the magistrate.

"Yes, sir; on the second floor there is—"

"I don't want to know that. I want to know whether anyone can come in or go out without your knowing who it was that passed your lodge."

"So far as coming in is concerned, when the gas is turned out and I'm in bed—I might make a mistake sometimes. The house is a respectable one, and people are not forced to give their names; but as for going out, I don't open the door unless I'm asked, and then I recognise the voice."

"Very well. What time did you go to bed last night?"

"At twelve exactly. The Marquis and Marchioness de Benscrade had just come in."

"And Madame Marly followed soon after?"

"Oh, no, sir. Madame Marly came in at two o'clock. I wasn't asleep; I heard her cab stop, and she took her candlestick from the ledge outside my lodge."

"And no one between twelve o'clock and two?"

"Excuse me, sir. One tenant came in about half-past twelve, and another went out a quarter of an hour afterwards."

Olga breathed again. Ernest had told her, at the gambling-saloon where she had at last found him, that he had left the house at exactly the same time as the doorkeeper said. As the doorkeeper had taken him for a tenant, all was well.

"Good," said the commissary; "and after Madame Marly?"

"After Madame Marly there were comings and goings," said the doorkeeper, mysteriously.

"What! comings and goings?"

"Yes. First of all, at half-past two, there was a ring; I opened the door and I heard a man's step. This time it was no one belonging to the house—I fancied I knew who it was, and I said nothing. I was wrong. But I couldn't know that there are people who take advantage of the fact

that they have been allowed here before, to come in by stealth and commit a crime."

"Explain yourself more clearly."

"Oh, I'll be very clear, sir; but first I must tell you about the comings and goings. Not ten minutes after the last one had come in—ting! ting!—two rings; there's only one person rings like that, and when she passed the lodge I recognised her by her creaking boots."

On this Daubrac looked at Olga more attentively, and saw that she appeared very ill at ease.

"Cut it short," said the commissary.

"There isn't much more now. At three o'clock—five minutes to three—the man and woman came down together. She knocked at the window; I opened the lodge door without asking who it was—I knew. Unfortunately I didn't know what she'd done, for if I'd known, I can assure you, sir, she wouldn't have gone."

"But who was she?"

The doorkeeper paused, like an actor who is about to deliver a telling sentence. He drew himself up, knit his brows, and said, pointing an accusing finger at Olga:

"It was this girl."

Olga sprang up like a lioness and cried:

"You lie!"

"No, I do not lie," replied the doorkeeper, without wavering. "You know well I'm not lying, and your lover knows it too, since he was with you. Oh, you had the 'cuteness to come in ten minutes before him, but you went out together after he had done the murder."

"It's not true. Ernest isn't a murderer, and he never set foot here."

"Go and tell that to the cook, whom he forced to give him something to eat and drink; he spent all the afternoon in the kitchen, swilling madame's wine."

"He left with me before seven o'clock," said Olga, in a hoarse voice.

"And at half-past two he came back with you to murder your mistress. It'll serve you both right if you're guillotined!"

"It's a shame for you to say that; what have I done, for you to try and get us into trouble? It's because Ernest had a quarrel with you once. All right; go on with your lies; we can prove we passed the whole night in the saloon in the Boulevard de la Chapelle, and it's you who'll be found guilty—as a false witness—scamp that you are!"

"That will do," said the doorkeeper, shrugging his shoulders. "Instead of insulting me, just walk about a bit, so that the commissary can hear your boots creak, and then you won't say again that I made a mistake last night, when I recognised your two rings and your step."

This was a home thrust, and it got beyond Olga's guard. The poor maid turned pale and trembled so violently that she was obliged to lean on the chimney-piece to prevent herself from falling. Daubrac looked at her with an air which seemed to say that his mind was made up. The commissary shook his head and did not appear much better disposed towards her.

"Pull yourself together," he said, "and be good enough to walk as far as the window and back."

Olga summoned up her courage, and said with an effort:

"And if my boots do creak, does that prove that I murdered madame? Ask this old fool how he recognised my step through the door of his lodge, which was shut. He might as well tell you he can hear the grass growing."

"I can't hear grass growing, but I heard the murderers walking; I swear that before Heaven," said the doorkeeper, solemnly.

"There's no need to swear," said the commissary, "but

only to answer my questions. Who is the man whom you suspect of having been here during the night?"

"He's her lover. One Ernest; a good-for-nothing fellow who makes a business of being a handsome man. For my part, I think he's got a hang-dog face; but I suppose this young lady likes him, as she keeps him."

"It's not true. Ernest works. He makes six francs a day."

"Six francs which come out of your pocket."

"Silence, both of you," said the commissary, sternly. Then, addressing the doorkeeper:

"Does the man come here often?"

"Every day that God sends, sir, and yet Madame Marly had forbidden him to set foot in the place."

"Never!" interrupted Olga; "madame knew quite well that I had him here. If she hadn't wanted him to come, she would have given you orders not to admit him."

"That would have been no good. I tried to prevent him going up two or three times, and he went past in spite of me, making impudent remarks; so much so that I complained to the landlord. If he'd only been content with using the back stairs, but no; nothing but the grand staircase would do for my lord. Didn't he have the cheek to bow to Madame de Benserade the other day, when he met her on the first-floor landing?"

"And what of that? That shows he was well brought up," retorted Olga, who could not contain herself when her Ernest was attacked.

"You used to hide him in your bedroom, when he came before madame had gone out," added the doorkeeper. "And it was worse than ever when she wasn't here. He used to walk about the rooms and make himself quite at home, smoking his pipe. There's another proof he was here last night—the stink of tobacco."

"That's true," said Daubrac. "I noticed it directly I came in."

"And he knew every hole and corner of the place; he knew where Madame Marly kept her lace and where she put her money. He didn't have much difficulty in taking what he wanted."

"That's just where you're wrong," said Olga, shrugging her shoulders, "the strong box hasn't been touched, old liar!"

"How do you know?" asked the commissary.

"Why," stammered the maid, uneasily, "I saw."

"I thought you didn't go into your mistress's room," continued the commissary, looking keenly at her.

"It wasn't me, it was Mary, the cook, who went in, and she almost dropped down on the ground when she saw poor madame bathed in her blood. Well, she told me nothing had been forced, neither the strong box, nor the desk, nor—"

"We shall have to see that. Do you know whether Madame Marly received any money yesterday?"

"Yes, sir. She had to take six thousand francs from her broker; she must have had them on her when she came in, and I'm certain she didn't lock them up before going to bed. She even left bank-notes there uncovered. I've often told her she was wrong, that she shouldn't tempt people; but madame would not listen to me, she was very particular about some things and not at all about others."

"Nothing was found on the table you speak of."

"Because the murderer took what there was. He didn't stop to force the strong box or open the drawers. He was afraid of being caught, the servants might have come in at any minute, and he went off with what he could put his hands on. Six thousand francs were worth the trouble. There are plenty of people in Paris who'll do murder for less than that."

"That is an important piece of information. Then you are certain that Madame Marly had received that sum after she left home yesterday?"

"Certain—no. But madame told me she was going to receive it. But you can find that out at her brokers."

"The murderer must have known it."

"If you are thinking of Ernest when you say that, sir, you are wrong. I was the only one who could have gossiped, and I never spoke to him about madame's affairs. But you've only got to search his place and search mine; you won't find a sou. He loses every time he plays cards; all his money goes in that."

"And yours too, no doubt."

"Oh! I never play, sir."

"You said just now you passed the night in a card saloon."

"So as not to leave Ernest. I thought I should prevent him from making a fool of himself, and unfortunately I didn't. We lost every sou."

"All that will be inquired into. Did you leave your lover this morning at his lodgings?"

"Yes, sir; but he will have gone out."

"He will be found. The detectives will search for him."

"To arrest him?"

"Do you think we could leave him alone? It's possible I may let him go after interrogating him. But I must see and hear him. If you could prove to me, for instance, that you were both in the Boulevard de la Chapelle from twelve o'clock till four, the *alibi* would be complete, and I should not send you to prison."

At that moment a detective entered the room and whispered something to the commissary, after having drawn him aside.

Daubrac followed this scene curiously, and thought no more of George de Gravigny. Olga was on hot coals; she

had thought she had done wonderfully well in speaking of the six thousand francs, for she felt pretty certain that she and her lover would both be searched. Now Ernest had told her, and she believed it, that he did not possess one franc. She fancied that in this way she could prove to the commissary that he was not guilty. But the information might turn against Ernest, in case he had told a lie, and she did not feel very comfortable, for Ernest was a person with whom it was necessary to be on one's guard.

The commissary's interview was rather a long one, and he came back with a face more stern than ever. He began by sending the doorkeeper away, and as Daubrac made a move as if to follow, he called him back.

"Ernest Maubert has not been found yet," said he, addressing Olga. "He left his lodgings this morning immediately after you, without saying where he was going. But we have certain clues, and we shall have him before the day is out. In the meantime, I have to inform you that the account you gave me of the way you employed your time is false from one end to the other. You left your lover on coming out of the Boule-Noire. Where did he go? We shall find that out soon. What we do know at present is, that you had supper without him, in company with others of his stamp. You left them at about a quarter past two, telling them that you were going to look for Ernest. You even went through the form of inquiring of his landlord, well knowing that he was not there. After that you took a cab and came to the Rue de l'Arcade, and you went back to the Boulevard de la Chapelle gambling-saloon at a quarter to four. Your lover had preceded you by twenty minutes."

"He swore to me that he had been there from half-past twelve," muttered Olga.

"He swore to you? Then you did separate after leaving the Boule-Noire? What did you do from that time until the

time when you met again at the gambling saloon? I'll tell you. Your lover, to whom you had given the key of Madame Marly's rooms, hid in your bedroom. Madame Marly came home at two o'clock. He must have murdered her a quarter of an hour afterwards; when you arrived the deed was done. You went out together and hastened to show yourselves in some public place, in order to try and establish an *alibi*. Only you were careful not to present yourselves at the same time, and you played a comedy, which had been agreed upon beforehand, by reproaching Ernest Maubert for having caused you to be running after him all night. But the case is made out. It's a case of the guillotine for both of you."

"Ernest condemned—executed!" cried the terrified Olga. "But he's as innocent as a new-born babe, and, to prove it to you, I'll tell you all, sir. Yes, I came here last night. I saw madame lying dead, and I fled—with a man I had found here—but that man was not my lover, he was madame's lover."

"Madame Marly's lover!" repeated the commissary. "Come, come! do you think you can make us believe that he murdered her?"

"I don't say he murdered her," replied Olga; "but I swear I found him here, and that we left the house together. It was he that the doorkeeper mistook for Ernest, when I knocked at the lodge window for him to open the door."

"We shall verify that later on. At present I shall merely make a note of the avowal you have made. You came back here last night. At what time, exactly?"

"It was about half-past two."

"And you remained here till three."

"Not quite, I believe—I couldn't say exactly—I was so upset, I had lost my head."

"Then you saw Madame Marly's body?"

"Yes, sir, and when I think of it, my blood runs cold. I didn't loiter here, I can assure you. I fled as soon as I was able to walk."

"You fled, without rousing the house, without telling the doorkeeper?"

"Madame's lover told me not to say a word."

"Another lie. But go on. You had leave to sleep out; what were you doing here in the middle of the night?"

"I was looking for Ernest. I tell you this, because I have sworn not to tell a lie."

"You were telling one just now, when you said you had not left him for a single moment?"

"I was afraid of getting him into trouble. But this is what happened. On coming out of the Boule-Noire, Ernest left me with his friends, saying that he had business to attend to, and promising me that he would return in half an hour—three-quarters at most. We went to supper at Coquet's, at the corner of the Rue Lepic. They closed at two o'clock, and Ernest had not come back. I went to look for him at his lodgings, and he had not been seen there. As I was rather annoyed, I made up my mind to come straight home and go to bed, so as to teach him not to treat me like that. And afterwards, when the gentleman that I found here dragged me away by force, I left him in the street, and started again to look for my lover. I knew that he would take any chance to go and play cards, and I drove to the saloon. Ernest was there, and he swore to me that he had been there all the evening. You say that that's not true, and that he had only just got there when I arrived. I won't contradict your man's statement. Ernest is quite capable of making up a tale to prevent me from thinking he had been making a fool of me from twelve till three. That's a matter we shall settle between us; but once

more, by all that I hold sacred, it wasn't him that I surprised here."

"Surprised, you say? Then you witnessed the crime?"

"Witnessed it! oh, no, sir. If I had seen anyone trying to hurt madame, I should have cried: Fire! and woke all the house. But it didn't happen so. I came up the back stairs, I went straight into my bedroom, and was going to bed, when I heard a noise. Some one was knocking over the chairs and breaking the china in the drawing-room. I was frightened, but I ran here just the same—with a candle—and I saw madame's lover, who was groping about the room, and had made all the noise."

"And he didn't attempt to kill you, to prevent you telling?"

"But he wasn't the murderer, sir. He had the key. Madame had given it him. He came in, all the lights were out, and as he had no matches in his pocket, he crossed the drawing-room in the dark. The bedroom door was open, he called madame, and got no answer. Then he went up to the bed, touched her, and found she was cold; just at that moment I arrived with the candle, which you see there, and on going, I left it on the chimney-piece. The gentleman was looking everywhere for a light."

"And then?"

"Then he told me that he was alarmed about madame, and I was uneasy too; we went into the bedroom together, and you know what we saw. The gentleman was as surprised and grieved as I was."

"Seriously, you believe he did not commit the murder?"

"He had only come in ten minutes before me. The doorkeeper told you so, and the fool thought it was Ernest, both coming in and going out. And why should he have killed her? He loved her well, and she was passionately fond of

him. A man like him doesn't become a thief in four-and-twenty hours."

"Very well. But, according to you, who is the culprit?"

"I can't tell, sir. If I knew the murderer, I would tell you: I'd like to see him tortured to death, the villain! What's certain, is, that it wasn't Ernest."

"So," continued the commissary, after a pause, "you say that you, no less than Madame Marly's lover, made up your minds to leave the corpse of your murdered mistress, without raising an alarm, without even troubling yourselves as to whether she wanted help. Confess that this was strange conduct. I could imagine that you, in the state of mind that you were in, terrified and unnerved, thought only of flight, although your first act should have been to rouse the house. But on the part of a man, it is really inexplicable."

"Especially," said Daubrac, "for those who, like me, know Monsieur Salers's habits and character."

"Monsieur Salers!" cried Olga; "but there's no question of him."

"How so? He has been Madame Marly's lover for the last two or three years."

"He had left her."

"When?"

"The day before yesterday".

"The day before yesterday was Sunday, and I thought he went shooting every Sunday."

"Exactly so; he came home when madame wasn't expecting him. There was someone with her, so you can understand—"

"That he left her; it's true, there was a rumour on the Bourse, yesterday, to that effect," said Daubrac.

"It was true, unfortunately. Monsieur Salers had warned madame, that if ever she took it into her head to do anything of that kind, it would be all over between them.

And so it was. She had no luck, for it was the first time. I'll answer for it."

"So it was this lover whom you found here last night?"

"Yes, sir. Madame had had no other since Monsieur Salers. Ah! it didn't last long."

"The name of this gentleman?" asked the commissary.

"His name is George de Gravigny," replied Olga, after a little hesitation. "He is very aristocratic. He is a viscount."

Daubrac started, and his face changed. It was a terrible blow for him. He felt that Olga was telling the truth; he saw that George would be seriously compromised, and that he, Daubrac, had contributed thereto in coming to look for him at Madame Marly's.

"You were not aware of this, sir?" asked the commissary, eyeing him keenly.

"Certainly not; I suspected it, as I told you when I came, but, now I know what has happened here, I am as much surprised as you."

The reply was so clear, and was given with such an air of frankness, that it was impossible to doubt its sincerity.

"Then," continued the commissary, addressing Olga, "it was Monsieur de Gravigny who advised you to go off without telling anyone, and who went with you himself, deserting his mistress who had just expired? No doubt he promised you to keep silence, and he exacted from you an engagement not to say a word about this meeting."

"That is true, sir, and I should never have broken my word to him, if no one had been suspected but myself; but from the moment Ernest is accused, I do not feel myself bound. Ernest is innocent. I don't say Monsieur de Gravigny is guilty, but it was not Ernest who was here; it was he, and I say it. So much the worse for him! He shouldn't have come here at all. You can take me to him. He daren't deny it."

"We shall see. You will go into your bedroom, and remain there till you are called. You will be watched, however."

"Oh, there's no fear of my attempting to escape, sir. I only ask you not to send Ernest to prison, because—no, I swear it, by my dead mother, he has done nothing."

The commissary made no reply; he was already at the door, giving instructions to his two men. Olga fell into a chair. Her legs failed her. One of the detectives entered quietly, and took up a position so as not to lose sight of her.

"Come along, sir," said the commissary; "I shall want you." Daubrac did not require to be told twice to act on this request, which had a strong resemblance to an order. He was by no means anxious to remain alone with Ernest's mistress, and he was dying to defend George de Gravigny.

On traversing the ante-room, the commissary took with him one of the detectives he had posted there, and left the other with orders to shut Olga in her bedroom, and keep guard over her there.

"If I rightly understand your intentions, sir," said Daubrac, when they had descended the stairs, "you propose to examine my friend George de Gravigny."

"Yes, certainly, and without losing a moment," replied the commissary. "I take you with me, because you may help me to find him more quickly. You know his habits, and I have confidence in you. And, besides, as you are a friend of his, you must wish that he should clear himself at once."

"And he will do so, I have no doubt."

"I hope so, but his conduct is strange, you must admit."

"We ought to know first whether the girl has told the truth."

"Oh, I don't intend to let her go, and her lover will be

arrested to-day. He is arrested already, perhaps. But I cannot avoid asking for some explanation from a man who saw his murdered mistress, and calmly left the place without telling anyone. Where do you think he is?"

This conversation took place in the entrance hall, and no one could hear it, for the detective had gone to await his chief outside, and the doorkeeper, consigned to his lodge, did not venture to show himself.

"It is plain that he had come from here when he went home about three o'clock," replied Daubrac. "Why did he not stop there, and what did he do afterwards? That is what I cannot imagine. Certainly he could not have felt disposed to finish the night with some other woman—supposing he knows another."

"He may have gone back to the club, and that is what I am going to ascertain. We will go to his rooms first. From there we will proceed to the club. And if he is there, as I want to avoid any scandal, you will go in with me and send for him, without telling him what is the matter; I sha'n't let the servants know who I am, and you alone will be present at the interview."

"I thank you for him and myself. George de Gravigny cannot be a murderer, and even if the rumour got about that he had been suspected it would be more than enough. The wretched business must be kept to ourselves."

"I can't make any promise," said the commissary, quickly; "after having heard Monsieur de Gravigny I must act as I think fit."

This was unanswerable, and Daubrac got into a cab, wondering how this strange business would end. To tell the truth, he was very uneasy, and he could not understand the nocturnal doings of his friend. Had George lost or won? It was impossible to guess, and this question was of the most importance to him, for he could not bring himself to think

that his friend had murdered Madame Marly; he was inclined to think that the deed had been done by Olga's lover, and he had no doubt that the whole thing would soon be cleared up. They arrived at the Rue Neuve-des-Mathurins, and the detective, who had ridden on the box, got down to ask for information.

Monsieur de Gravigny had not come home.

Daubrac gave the address of the club, which was in the neighbourhood, and they drove straight there. Here the commissary thought it best to take action himself. He left his man with the cab and entered the club with Daubrac, whom he instructed to make the necessary inquiries. At such an early hour the clubs are deserted, unless by some extraordinary chance cards are still going on. Games have been known which have lasted thirty-six hours. The doorkeeper was not at his post, and there was no footman in the hall. The whole establishment had evidently retired late, and everyone was still asleep. Daubrac was looking for someone, when he saw a member whom he knew, a stockbroker, and a determined gambler.

"Have you come to finish off the wounded?" inquired this gentleman, whose eyes were heavy, his face drawn, and his necktie in disorder. "You're too late, my dear fellow. Order reigns. There are nothing but corpses upstairs."

"What!" cried Daubrac, "they're playing still!"

"No, it's over, or very nearly. There are only three or four more hands to play of the stiffest game that's ever been seen, I should think. I've lost all I have, and, in fact, all that I didn't have."

"Then the prince has won enormously?" asked Daubrac, not satisfied with this information. He said to himself that their four thousand francs must have gone over to Russia.

"The prince!" cried his informant. "He's been gone a long time. Your friend George de Gravigny began by

winning a hundred thousand francs from him, but he lost them all again to the last sou, and the money he brought with him into the bargain."

"I recognise him well in that?" muttered Daubrac, whose face fell. The commissary took no part in this conversation, but it may be imagined that he was listening attentively. Not a word escaped him.

"Upon that," continued the unlucky gambler, "Gravigny left the table, saying that he was going home to bed; and, twenty minutes afterwards, the Russian, seeing that no one staked more than fifteen louis, threw the game up. Such trifling proceedings don't amuse this bloated millionaire."

"And no doubt he wasn't sorry to get off so well."

"With the paltry thousand louis that he'd won. Why, it wasn't worth the trouble. He went because he had had enough of it."

"The game went on, then, after he had gone?"

"Rather! the punters wanted to make up their losses, but it wasn't quite a success, when Gravigny appeared again at the end of an hour."

"Impossible! you said just now he had lost all."

"He went to fetch some more money from home, or from somewhere else, and he proposed to us to take the bank. We were ready enough to consent, as we thought he was out of luck. Well, he began with three hundred louis, and he's been pulling in our money for the last six hours; everyone's had enough, and he's just going off with fifty thousand to the good. I'm nine thousand out alone."

"Then he's still here?" asked Daubrac, excitedly.

"Not for long; he's just putting the finishing touch to two or three fools who are still holding out. You are just come in time to take him away, and it will be doing him a good turn, for, gambler that he is, he might go on and lose all again. But I'm off," he concluded; "I must be on the

Bourse at twelve o'clock. I've only got an hour to dress and have some breakfast and a bath."

He ran down stairs, and Daubrac remained alone with the commissary, who at once remarked:

"You heard that. I know all now, but that is no reason why I should not examine Monsieur de Gravigny; on the contrary, for my opinion of him has undergone a great change, since I know what he did last night."

"I thought you knew it before."

"No, I did not know that, after having seen his dead mistress, he had gone back to cards. Guilty or not, that fact does not do much credit to his feelings; but there is something more serious still. Monsieur de Gravigny, who had lost everything—your money and his own—absented himself for an hour and brought back three hundred louis. In ordinary language three hundred louis are six thousand francs, aren't they?"

"Certainly."

"Exactly the sum received by Madame Marly. You haven't forgotten the maid's statement, I presume. She told us that her mistress had to receive that sum during the afternoon, from her broker; that she came home to sleep, and that she had the habit, on going to bed, of placing her money on a little onyx table at the head of her bed."

"Then, you think— ?"

"At present I merely note the coincidence in the amounts, and request you to do exactly as I am about to tell you. In your friend's interest—and, above all, in the interest of truth—I am going to try an experiment which will be decisive. If I presented myself in the cardroom I should not effect my aim, for I am not a member of the club, and I could only get in by saying who I am. I want you, then, to send up your name to Monsieur de Gravigny, asking him to come down, and without telling him that you are not alone. There is a strangers' room here, I suppose?"

"Yes, there, at the end of that passage."

"Take me there, then. And when Monsieur de Gravigny comes to us, promise me to say nothing which may inform him that we have come from the Rue de l'Arcade. You will let me speak, and at the first reply he makes I shall know whether he is telling the truth."

"I understand," said Daubrac. "And as I don't believe in George's guilt, I promise to do all you ask. Come along, sir."

This conversation took place at the beginning of a long gallery which served the members as anteroom and promenade. It was neutral ground, to which strangers were admitted, but they had no right on that account to enter any of the rooms. Daubrac pointed out the way to the commissary, who did not look what he actually was, and whom one could easily have taken for one of his friends. They met two more card-players who were going off, with hanging heads and discomforted mien; they contented themselves with nodding to Daubrac and passed by, grumbling at their own bad luck and the good luck of others. Finally an attendant appeared at the end of the gallery, yawning as if he would have broken his jaw, and dragging his legs along like a man who has just passed nine or ten hours without sitting down or closing an eye.

"So Viscount de Gravigny is in the card-room still?" asked Daubrac. "Yes, he must be there. Tell him I am waiting to speak to him."

The poor wretch of a servant, who was no doubt going to bed, retraced his steps much against his will, and Daubrac opened the door of a large room where the members received their friends.

"Leave the door open, please," said the commissary.

He was evidently afraid that George should go off unseen, and he was anxious to see everyone who passed. He did

not know Monsieur de Gravigny, but he calculated that the latter would see his friend on passing and would come to him. This excess of precaution certainly did not go to prove that he thought favourably of that gentleman's case. George appeared almost immediately, and deliberately entered the room.

"Oh, here you are," said he to Daubrac, without troubling himself about the presence of a stranger. "What do you want? And how did you come to think that I was still at the club, at ten o'clock in the morning?"

The question was an embarrassing one for a man who had promised not to interfere with the commissary's action, and Daubrac could think of nothing better than to mutter a few unintelligible words. The magistrate, who had his plans all ready laid, came to the rescue.

"Sir," he began, "I came from Monsieur Paul Salers, and as I had not the honour to know you, your friend Monsieur Daubrac was good enough to accompany me."

"If you come as a second, I am prepared to have someone who will arrange with you the conditions of a meeting," replied George, frowning. "You will allow me to remark, however, that Monsieur Salers is a little late in declaring himself insulted. I saw him here last night, and there was nothing to prevent him from confiding to one of the members of the club who were playing cards, the mission which brings you here."

"Doubtless he did not care about naming to one of them the person who was the cause of your quarrel."

"What person?" asked George, impatiently. "I don't understand what you mean. Is it Prince Lounine? A difficulty arose over a game of cards, but there was no altercation."

"You are perfectly well aware, sir, that the person is a woman."

George started, and his face became overclouded, but he was not disconcerted and he replied in a firm voice:

"Then it concerns Madame Marly?"

"That is so," said the commissary, looking fixedly at him. "You are not unaware that she was Monsieur Salers's mistress when he surprised you with her—on Sunday evening."

"I knew it; but Monsieur Salers was not my friend."

"No matter; since the scene which took place between you, you have seen Madame Marly."

"I don't deny it."

"You saw her yesterday—last night—"

"Sir?" said George, angrily, "perhaps you will explain to me—"

"She was expecting you, no doubt."

"This is too much! I begin to think you are trifling with me. What do you mean by this impertinence? And, first of all, who are you? I never was spoken to like this by a second."

"If I told you that Madame Marly had sent me?"

"I should tell you that you lied," cried George, passionately.

"How do you know that!" asked the commissary quickly.

This was said in such a way that George composed himself instantly. Daubrac, who was watching him and who knew him well, saw his features contract, and perceived that he was making a prodigious effort to regain possession of himself. With the energy which he possessed, he was successful. But Daubrac little expected what followed.

"Spare yourself these useless subterfuges," said George de Gravigny, coolly. "I see it all. You are a police officer. Madame Marly was murdered last night, and you have come to examine me. If you had begun by telling me the truth, instead of setting a ridiculous trap, I should have said so before."

"He doesn't think he's committing himself, poor fellow!" thought Daubrac.

"Madame Marly—your mistress—murdered! And you tell me this!" said the commissary cunningly.

"I suppose you want me to admit that I knew of her death before any one else. Don't put yourself to so much trouble. Listen only to me. I dined yesterday evening with Madame Marly, whom I had known for four and twenty hours, not more. She left me late to go to one of her friend's—Caroline Lebarbier's—a fact which you can verify. It was agreed between us that I should join her at her place, after having passed a few hours at the club, and she gave me the key of her rooms. I came here; I played cards, and, after having won at first, I lost the four thousand francs that I had brought."

"Ours," said his partner, sadly.

"Upon that I left and went to the Rue de l'Arcade. On entering Madame Marly's I was surprised to find no light. I called; she did not answer. The door of her bedroom was open. I went to the bed, and my hands touched a body, a body which was as cold as a corpse. Being alarmed, I went back into the drawing-room, and in the darkness I knocked over several things; then, when at last I had obtained a lighted candle, I went back into the bedroom and saw the unfortunate woman—dead; her throat had been cut at one stroke."

"Yes, one stroke," said the commissary, without appearing much stirred. "What did you do then?"

"My first thought was to call out, and the only reason why I did not do so was because I was satisfied that help was useless; she was dead."

"And you calmly retired!"

"I will tell you why I acted thus," replied George, with extraordinary *sang-froid*. "You can accuse me of callous-

ness if you like. I shall not attempt to defend myself against a reproach which affects me little, for it is unjust. I was upset, much upset, at the sight of this bleeding corpse. But I did not love Madame Marly; I hardly knew her; our acquaintance, the result of chance, would probaby not have lasted longer than most caprices. I had to think of myself, of the danger I ran, the danger of being accused of murder; but this I feared little, for it would have been easy to clear myself; the danger of being mixed up in an affair in which my name could not figure without damage to my reputation —this was more serious, and it only rested with me to avoid the scandal that I feared. No one knew that Madame Marly was expecting me last night—I thought so at least, and it appears I was mistaken, since you have come to question me—no one had seen me enter the house, and I was pretty certain of getting out without anyone seeing me. I went. Look at my conduct as you like. I have told the truth."

"You have at least the merit of not concealing your feelings," replied the magistrate. "I have only to inform you that I am a commissary of police, exercising his functions, and that you are undergoing an examination at the present moment."

"Ask what you please. I shall answer as directly as I have just done."

"Then," said the commissary, without appearing to attach much importance to the question, "on leaving Madame Marly's house, did you return direct to the club and begin to play again?"

"No, not direct; I went first to my place in the Rue Neuve-des-Mathurins, but I stayed there a very short time."

"You went there, no doubt, to get money to replace that which you had lost, and so endeavour to make good your losses."

"If he says 'yes,' he's lying," thought Daubrac, who was following the conversation with anxious attention; "and he will be wrong to do that, for it will easily be proved that he had not a sou at home."

"No," replied Monsieur de Gravigny, without hesitation. "On touching Madame Marly's body in the dark, I had stained my hands and linen with blood. I couldn't come back to the club in that state."

The commissary started and did not refuse the explanation. He said to himself:

"If this man's innocent, he's an uncommonly cool customer; if he's guilty, he's the cleverest rogue I've ever seen."

Daubrac could not recover from the effect of hearing George relate so terrible an adventure. He spoke of his hands and linen being stained with blood as he would have spoken of a splash of mud from the street. Daubrac did not doubt that this astonishing coolness was the proof of the innocence of the bold man who told the truth so frankly in such a dangerous position. But when a man has been in the police all his life he is more difficult to convince, and the commissary resumed, without allowing his thoughts to appear:

"You were right to make haste to remove the traces of a contact which was, to say the least, alarming; for if you had murdered Madame Marly you would have been exactly in the same state as you were after touching her bloody corpse."

"I never thought of that," said the viscount, shrugging his shoulders; "I obeyed a feeling of disgust which anyone can understand, but I never thought I should be seriously accused. Upon what foundation can you accuse me? There is no crime without a motive. Murder is committed from revenge or from cupidity, if it is not done in a burst of rage. Madame Marly was murdered in her bed, whilst

she was reading. Therefore there was no struggle between her and the culprit. I had no ill feeling against a charming woman who had been my mistress since the day before. Why should I desire revenge? She had done nothing but love me and sacrifice for my sake a position of which I could not offer her the equivalent. No one will venture to suggest, I hope, that I murdered her to get her money. She would have given it me if I had wanted it."

"That is quite possible," cried the commissary, with a convinced air. "These things happen in the class of society to which Madame Marly belonged, and it is evident that, if she had taken you as her lover, it was not from an interested motive, for—I am obliged to mention this to you—you had no fortune."

"I had one, I have it no longer, and I conceal the fact from no one."

"But you play cards."

"A denial would come badly from me—here, at ten o'clock in the morning."

"And you have just lost, after a long sitting, all that you had.'

"On the contrary, I have won nearly fifty thousand francs."

"Before going to the Rue de l'Arcade, or afterwards?"

"After," replied George, without hesitating for a second.

"But, previously, you had lost—a sum of four thousand francs, if I am not mistaken, half of which belonged to your friend here."

"Oh, Monsieur Daubrac has told you that we were in partnership for last night. I am very much obliged to him for having given you such correct information."

This remark was accompanied by a significant look at Daubrac, who was evidently much disconcerted.

"I couldn't help answering a magistrate when he was questioning me," he muttered.

"You might also tell me," said Gravigny, drily, "where you met this magistrate? and why you thought fit to bring him to the club, where you expected to find me?"

The commissary took upon himself to reply to this.

"Chance did it all," said he. "Monsieur Daubrac called on you early this morning. Not finding you at home, he imagined you were at Madame Marly's."

"Why should he imagine that?"

"I met you at her door last night, just before twelve, and I thought you were coming from her place, my dear fellow."

"Please not to be so familiar with me," interrupted George.

"Monsieur Daubrac came to ask for you at the Rue de l'Arcade," continued the commissary, "he met me there—"

"And told you that he was in search of me?"

"It was quite natural he should do so, in order to explain his presence in a house where murder had been committed."

"Consequently, if it had not been for him, you would never have known that I knew Madame Marly. Very good. I know what my duty is."

Daubrac did not utter a word, but he would have preferred to be elsewhere.

"To return to my question, sir," continued the commissary; "you had lost all your money when you went to Madame Marly's?"

"Every sou, and when I returned to the club I sat down to play with six thousand francs."

"Which you had been to take from your desk, had you not?"

"No, my desk was empty."

"But—"

"You want to know where the money came from. I will tell you. It belonged to Madame Marly."

"What! You confess that—"

"Excuse me, I *confess* nothing. I *declare*, which is a very different thing. The word *confess* is not in a gentleman's vocabulary. A man lies or he tells the truth. And if a man lies he is a scamp."

"I don't ask you to moralise: I ask you to explain how Madame Marly's money came into your hands."

"You would have known that already if you had not interrupted me. I dined with Madame Marly at the Café Anglais. During dinner she told me that she had cashed some coupons at her brokers. There were six thousand francs' worth. It was a matter of indifference to me. As she was leaving me she said that they played cards at Caroline Lebarbier's, that she was afraid of the temptation, and she asked me to take care of the money. Naturally I replied that I too was going to play, and for much heavier stakes; that I was no less liable to temptation than herself, and that, not being a notary, I did not receive investments."

"But you took it finally."

"No; my hand was forced, in the most literal sense of the word. Madame Marly placed in it, in spite of me, six thousand-franc notes."

"Oh!" said the commissary, in a tone of a man who doubts, or rather in that of a man who does not believe at all.

"You think I could have helped taking them. You are mistaken. At the moment when she put them into my hands the waiter came in with the bill. I could not engage in a ridiculous struggle before him to make Madame Marly take back her money. The waiter's name is Antonin, and I expect he saw the notes in my hand. If you will question him he will probably tell you."

"I shall do so," muttered the commissary.

"Wait! I haven't done. After having played me this trick, Madame Marly got up to put on her hat and mantle, whilst I paid the bill. The waiter helped her, and it was impossible for me to restore the money. I thought I should overtake her on the stairs, but she had got such a good start of me that she was in a cab before I set foot on the pavement. The same difficulty presented itself again. The porter was holding the door of the cab, and it was impossible to talk about the matter in his presence. His name is François; have him called. He will relate the scene as I have related it. Madame Marly said good-bye to me without taking her hands out of her muff, and she went off, laughing heartily at the trick she had played me. I held the money in spite of myself, and there were only two things for me to do: to throw the notes into the street or put them into my pocket-book."

"And you preferred to keep them. I can understand that. But to play them—"

"True, I was wrong. That's a matter between me and my conscience, and I should strongly object to anyone reproaching me for what I did. You, sir, represent the law, and I will willingly explain to you how I came to do it. When I arrived at the club at twelve o'clock Prince Lounine was taking the bank. That was an opportunity or never of making use of all my resources. However, I only used the four thousand francs of my own—and Monsieur Daubrac's—another account to be settled—and, after having lost them, I went: the twenty players who were there will tell you the same, and almost all of them knew that I started with four thousand francs and not a louis more."

"One of them has told Monsieur Daubrac so already, in my presence. But afterwards?"

"After that I went to the Rue de l'Arcade. You know

what I did there, and why I went to my rooms. You can understand that I was much upset, and that I wanted to forget the horrible sight I had just seen. I went back to the club and staked the six thousand francs that did not belong to me. You see I conceal nothing. I won fifty thousand, which I shall hand over to Madame Marly's heirs, for they are hers by right. That is all," concluded the viscount, without betraying the least emotion. "Have you any other questions to ask me?"

The commissary had not finished the examination, but he was much puzzled. Never during all his long career had he heard a man so clearly refute in advance all the points of a charge which he had foreseen. Monsieur de Gravigny had not waited for this charge to be made. He had met it in advance, and the perplexed magistrate, professionally mistrustful, wondered whether he had not to deal with a culprit who had prepared his defence as an advocate prepares that of his client. In order to make certain of this he changed his tactics.

"You met no one in Madame Marly's rooms?" he asked abruptly.

Monsieur de Gravigny was evidently not prepared for this point blank question, for he hesitated before replying.

"If I had surprised the murderer there," said he, after a moment's silence, "I promise you that one of us would not have left the place alive. I had a revolver in my pocket. I would have blown his brains out, or he would have killed me."

"It would have been better to arrest him," said the commissary coldly; "but I know perfectly well that he did not stop there after committing the abominable crime. But—Madame Marly had servants."

"Yes. A cook and a maid. Unfortunately, she had been ill-advised enough to give them both leave to sleep out."

"But, possibly, they had not profited by this permission to stay out all night."

"In any case they would come home this morning, and you have probably seen them."

"As a matter of fact, I have seen them."

"Well, what did they tell you?"

"The maid told me of a fact which you have not mentioned, and which is, however, of some importance."

The viscount reflected for an instant, and replied without emotion:

"She told you that she met me in the drawing-room."

"Exactly so."

"Very good. Then there is no need for me to conceal anything further."

"Then you have concealed something?" asked the commissary.

The thrust went home. George de Gravigny turned pale. He saw how awkward his compromise with the maid—and what a maid!—would look in a man of his position. But he quickly recovered from the shock, and replied coolly:

"No one is proof against moments of weakness. This is what passed. This girl came suddenly into the room whilst I was looking for a light. She was as much surprised to find me there as I was to see her. You can guess what happened. When she appeared I was not yet aware that Madame Marly was dead. It was she who noticed that I had blood on my hands."

"And she went with you into the room where the body was. What did she say on seeing her mistress had been murdered?"

"Nothing, or next to nothing. She nearly fainted."

"And she showed you a light, did she not? She came in with a lighted candle in her hand?"

"Yes; and I recollect that as we almost ran against one

another at the drawing-room door, she was so alarmed that she let the candlestick fall."

"But she picked it up again?"

"Yes, and relighted it. I believe that when we came away she forgot to extinguish it, and left it on the chimney-piece."

"And you left the house together?"

"Yes, sir, and I may add that I was foolish enough to promise not to say that I had seen her there."

"On condition that she did the same for you. You mutually swore to say nothing about it. It was a compact."

"I have already told you the reasons which made me desirous that my name should not be mixed up in this unfortunate business, and I hope you understand them. I was wrong, I admit, and I am punished for it. But, since this creature broke her word, nothing obliges me to conceal from you that she was there."

"Before you?"

"That I don't know. She told me that she had just come in, when she came to see what the noise was which I had made in knocking over a china bowl. But I am not certain that she was not there before me."

All these replies were so correct that they made a favourable impression on the commissary. Monsieur de Gravigny had said nothing but what was true, he had not said a single word contradicting the facts already known. Cleverness has its limits. It cannot go so far as to guess things which happened when the man who relates them was not present.

"Now, sir," said the magistrate, "do you believe this girl Olga guilty?"

"No, sir. She had every reason to wish that a mistress who treated her kindly and gave her good wages should live. But it is very probable that she knows the murderer."

"Her lover, eh?"

"I may be of that opinion, but I have no proofs."

"There is, at least, a strong presumption against this man, who leads a scandalous life. He says he has a trade, but he does no work. He lives on the money which the girl Olga gives him."

"That is so. She almost admitted to me that she kept him. I picked up by chance a significant piece of information, which you can form your own opinion on. A member of this club, Monsieur Charles Deshaies, went yesterday evening to the ball where this man had taken Olga."

"Yes, to the Boule-Noire."

"That's it. Deshaies had known Olga for a long time, having been the lover of a certain woman in whose service Olga was before going to Madame Marly. He spoke to the girl, and, on leaving the ball, he saw her give the key of her mistress's rooms to the vile rascal whom she keeps."

"And you don't call that a proof!" cried the commissary.

"At least it's a strong presumption. I told Olga of it. She did not deny the fact, but she defended herself and defended her lover with great energy. She says that she sent the man to the Rue de l'Arcade to fetch some money which she had left in her bedroom."

"I have questioned her. She contradicted herself, and I am certain that she's lying. Now, sir, that you have answered all I have asked you—and answered straightforwardly, as I have pleasure in stating—may I beg you to tell me your opinion about this affair. Who murdered Madame Marly?"

"I cannot say, but it seems to me probable that Olga's lover did."

"She being an accomplice?"

"I don't think that. Olga made the great mistake of

entrusting the key to him. The wretch, finding himself alone with Madame Marly, who was in bed, took advantage of the chance to rob her, and, so as not to be surprised whilst doing so, he murdered her. But he had not told Olga of his abominable scheme, neither has he admitted it to her since."

"That is also my opinion," said the commissary, who had quite changed his tone. "The man is being actively pursued, and he will be captured during the course of the day. When we have him, light will be thrown on the matter. So far as concerns you, sir, I shall act differently. I am not a supporter of the method which consists in arresting everyone who is more or less implicated in a crime, and releasing the innocent afterwards. I will only inform you that you must hold yourself at my disposal at all times, until the affair has been thoroughly investigated."

"That is a matter of course," said George, delighted to get off so cheaply.

"I must warn you also that you will be watched."

"That matters little to me, so long as the public do not bother their heads about me."

"You may rest assured that, should anything leak out, it will not come from the body which I represent."

"Nor from me," said Daubrac.

"Come along, gentlemen," concluded the commissary, "I have nothing to do here and a great deal to do elsewhere."

George de Gravigny did not require to be twice asked to follow the worthy magistrate who had just exhibited so much impartiality and good nature. They left the club together, and, before getting into a cab, the commissary conferred for a moment with the detective who was mounting guard on the pavement. They then separated, after a ceremonious exchange of bows. Daubrac, not being im-

plicated, had kept in the background, but as soon as he was alone with George he cried joyfully:

"Well, my dear fellow, you've had a bad time of it, but all's well that ends well."

"Don't let us stop here," said George, who did not appear so satisfied as his friend. "We shall be able to talk better on the other side of the street."

"As you please," said Daubrac.

The other side of the street was that on which the Grand-Hôtel and the Café de la Paix stand. They had no difficulty in arriving there, for it was too early for much traffic."

"Halloa!" said Daubrac, "the detective that the commissary left is following us. He's watching you, my boy."

"Never mind that," said George drily. "I owe you four thousand francs; I am going to pay you them."

"Oh, it's like that, is it? Then you are angry with me? What for, *sacrébleu!* For going to look for you at Madame Marly's this morning? Why, it's the luckiest thing in the world that I went there. It must have been known, sooner or later, that you were her lover, and that you were to sleep there last night. Goodness knows what would have happened, and in any case there would have been a horrible scandal, whilst now the whole thing is nipped in the bud. As for the four thousand francs," added Daubrac, laughing, "you have no right to pay them to me, since the money that you won belongs to Claudine's heirs—you've said so yourself to the commissary. I say, do you see the detective pretending to look at the illustrated papers on that kiosk, and watching you out of the corners of his eyes?"

"The heirs will lose nothing thereby," replied George, pale with rage. "I'll go and ask my uncle for the money, telling him the mean trick you played; but I'm anxious to

give you them at once, so as to have the right to kill you to-morrow morning."

"I wouldn't stand this, I can tell you, if I didn't see Paul Salers coming towards us, and if I got in a passion he'd go and spread it about that we had quarrelled in the street."

"He'll spread it about that I struck you. That's exactly what I want. You can't refuse to fight now."

And George de Gravigny, taking the four bank-notes from his pocket, threw them at Daubrac, who caught them in the air and said coolly:

"I'll take the blow as given. My seconds will wait on you within two hours."

VIII.

The clubs of which Count Roger de Gravigny was a member and even the promoter—an honour which is equivalent to a title nowadays—had nothing in common with those which his nephew George frequented so assiduously. The Union, The Jockey, and The Agricultural—commonly called the "Potato"—are privileged clubs into which it is not an easy matter to obtain an entrance. Play is high there, but baccarat has never become acclimatized; a good deal of prosy talk goes on, and the amusements are few. But it is an honour to be a member because of the difficulty attending admission. Fernand Daubrac, and even Paul Salers, would have been unanimously blackballed if they had taken it into their heads to put up for it. But George de Gravigny would have been gladly welcomed, if he had not gone so wofully astray from his earliest youth. George, by dint of running into debt and keeping doubtful company, had ended by losing caste, as they say in India, where a Brahmin who degrades himself descends to the rank of a Pariah. George was therefore reduced to gamble in second-rate clubs, where all that is asked of anyone is, not to cheat, and to pay their debts of honour within forty-eight hours.

This degradation of a nephew who bore his name was infinitely distressing to the old count. He had cursed George, had severed all connection with him, and yet at heart he loved him still. The scene in the restaurant had even caused him to have a better opinion of him. He was

pleased with him for having treated so disdainfully his insulting creditor, and in paying Daubrac, Count Roger had done his best to save the honour of a Gravigny who had been publicly insulted. To tell the truth, he had afterwards regretted this unreflecting impulse of generosity. The countess, his wife, had that day come up from the country, just in time to hear the account of the Café Bignon scene and the final act which had completed it. And the countess, who was a person of great common-sense, had told Count Roger that he had committed a most foolish act. She had represented to him that George did not deserve that his uncle should interfere in the matter, and that moreover it was a singular way of showing his interest in the poor boy to give him an opportunity of fighting a duel."

"Your generosity will probably result in getting him killed," this prudent aunt had said, "and will cost you two hundred louis."

Upon which the count, much struck by the justice of this reasoning, had greatly repented of what he had done, and had begun to cast about to discover some means of preventing the consequences of his imprudence. He did not know how to proceed. Go and discover George? An offended uncle's dignity forbade this. And, besides, what could he say to him to prevent him from fighting? The part of peacemaker ill-befitted Count Roger, who had fought ten duels before his marriage. To present himself at the creditor's, and preach conciliation to him, would have been a ridiculous step on his part. For lack of something better, he resolved to abstain altogether, and await events. But he had a bad time of it, from the Monday to the Tuesday.

On Tuesday morning he went once more to make a melancholy breakfast at Bignon's. He thought he might gather news of the affair which had originated there the day before, knowing well that the rumour of a duel between men

occupying a certain position in Parisian society, spreads like lightning, and hoping to meet, in the fashionable restaurant, some one who would tell him all about it. The only way in which he could expect to obtain information was by listening to the conversation of strangers, for his nephew's friends were not his. But he had his labour for his pains. No one spoke either of George or his opponent, and the head waiter, whom he discreetly questioned, could not furnish him with any news. He had not seen the gentleman since, and, moreover, he did not know Daubrac at all. In his despair Count Roger took an heroic course. He drove to the Rue Neuve-des-Mathurins, asked the doorkeeper whether his nephew was at home, and was told that he had just gone out. So, if George had fought a duel, he was not wounded ; and the uncle, feeling almost comfortable again, retired to his favourite club, The Union, where he was fond of playing a healthy rubber of whist before dinner, at one louis a point. It was early, and he found no one there. A look at the papers soon plunged him into a gentle sleep, and, at four o'clock, he was still slumbering in a comfortable arm-chair, when he was awoke by Prince Lounine's voice.

"Good-day, my dear count," said that gentleman. "I'm delighted to meet you, for I have a lot of things to tell you. Just fancy, last night, I made the acquaintance of your nephew, Viscount George de Gravigny. He's a charming fellow. Why did you never speak of him to me when I was in Paris before?"

"We're on rather bad terms," stammered the old gentleman, who was little expecting this question.

"Oh, I see. You've been trying to get him married, and he preferred a life of independence. Frankly, he's right to enjoy himself as long as possible. For my part, if I had a virtuous nephew, I would disinherit him."

"I can't reproach mine for that ; but, tell me, my dear prince, where the deuce did you meet the rascal?"

"In rather a shady place. A club where they admit anyone, and where, I had been told, they played very high. They've almost banished baccarat from ours, and I allowed myself to be tempted. I was punished."

"You lost?"

"No. I won—oh, only a trifle; a few thousand francs. I'm sorry I wandered from the fold. The game wasn't worth it. Your nephew dropped two hundred louis, and I believe he was one of the biggest losers."

"What! he played!"

"Oh, very little. Have you extorted an oath from him not to touch a card? I hope not. That kind of thing was all very well in the uncles of days gone by."

"I let my nephew do as he likes. Only, what you tell me surprises me a little. I thought he was hard up."

"All the more reason for playing, my dear count. He very nearly won heavily of me. He began by getting a hundred thousand francs out of my bank. Then luck turned. I'm very sorry he did not win a million. But luck will be sure to come back to him; I know why he lost. He was Claudine Marly's lover."

"I didn't know that. This Marly is a fast woman, I believe?"

"A very pretty girl, who used to be my mistress three years ago, and who had the singular gift of bringing her lovers the most terrible bad luck. I have just been told that she was murdered last night. I pity her, and I regret her, for I used to be very fond of her; but it's lucky for your nephew that she's dead."

"Very lucky, indeed," growled the uncle, dumbfounded by this avalanche of news, which was by no means pleasant hearing to him; "however, if this creature has been murdered, it appears to me that George might find himself implicated in a very awkward business, and I should be very much annoyed

to have my name mixed up in a case of that kind. Have you any details of the murder?"

"Very few. Corbier told me about it just now in the street. You know Corbier? a kind of commercial traveller, who pursues me with his familiarities on the pretext that he has sold me wine. It appeared that poor Claudine was murdered in her bed; she was alone—for a wonder—and they suspect some scoundrel who lived on her maid of having cut her throat, in order to rob her. But it is impossible for Viscount de Gravigny to be guilty. One may be a fast woman's lover without taking her life. He did not live with her; in fact, I believe the acquaintance was not of long date."

"No matter," said the count, rising. "I would have given a good deal for it not to have occurred, and I must leave you, my dear prince. I want to know exactly what has happened, and I shall go to try and find my nephew."

"Give him my compliments," cried Lounine. "I'm delighted to know him, and I hope we shall improve our acquaintance."

Count Roger did not hear this gracious remark. He had left the room in great haste, and would have left his overcoat in the hall if a footman had not handed it to him.

"The wretched boy! this crowns all," he muttered, hurriedly going down the steps. "This affair will make a terrible scandal. He must be got away at any price. I'll promise him fifty thousand francs to go and make a fresh start in Australia. But he sha'n't have them till he gets to Sydney; if I gave him them here he would gamble them away. Truly, it was kind of me to make myself uneasy about his duel. He passed the night in a card-room. The fellow has no heart. It's incredible."

But Monsieur de Gravigny had not got to the end of his surprises. Just as he was entering the Boulevard de la

Madeleine, he almost run into a man who was turning the corner sharply so as to enter the club, and in stepping back to avoid him, he recognised his nephew.

"So you are here, sir!" said he, angrily. "I was looking for you."

"And I was going into your club in the hope of meeting you there, sir," replied George, coolly.

"What! you were looking for me!" cried the count. "What have you to say to me, then? You must be in sore need of me, since, for a long time past, my existence has been a matter of indifference to you."

"You are quite right, uncle," said George, unconcernedly. "I have a service to ask of you."

"A money service, no doubt?"

"Yes, a money service."

"You are probably not aware that I, yesterday, paid the creditor who permitted himself to insult you in my presence, in a public place."

"I know it, uncle."

"And you return to the charge? Do you take me for a fool?"

"I take you for a gentleman who is jealous of the honour of his name."

"The honour of my name! it well becomes *you* to talk of that. For the last ten years, sir, you have been dragging it in the mire."

"I admit that I have compromised it; nothing more," said George, proudly.

"You are truly full of indulgence for yourself. To contract debts—and what debts!—loans from men whom you have no right even to recognise, and who treat you ignominiously, in order to force you to pay them. To frequent gambling hells where any well-born man should blush to set foot—do you call that compromising yourself?"

"Yes, that is the correct term. I have serious faults to reproach myself with, but no low acts."

"To live with a hussy who traffics her charms, when one is ruined, how can you qualify such conduct?"

"What woman do you speak of?" asked George, quickly. "Who has told you?"

"You are not aware, then, that at the present moment all Paris knows that this Madame Marly, who was your mistress, was murdered last night? Do you think your name won't figure in the proceedings which it will give rise to?"

"I had hoped that it would not. I hope so no longer."

"That means to say, no doubt, that you are already implicated."

"Yes."

"And you don't blush with shame! And you calmly come and inform me that a Gravigny, my nearest relative, my brother's son, will appear as a witness at the assizes, and that there he will be obliged to admit that he was the favoured lover of a vendor of pleasure! I see you have lost all sense of honour. Let us part. I know you no more."

"Very well; we shall not see one another again. But to-day you shall hear my full confession."

"It matters little to me."

"You will not speak so when you know all. It is important, on the contrary, that you should know my exact position, were it only to prepare you for the consequences which may result from it. I do not know whether I shall appear as a witness against Madame Marly's murderer; it may be that he will not be discovered; it may also be that I shall be killed to-morrow, but I had a narrow escape of having to appear as the prisoner."

"So you were suspected of having killed this wretched woman! What sort of a reputation have you, then, for

any judge to believe for a single instant that you were guilty?"

"It was, on the contrary, to my reputation—or, if you like, to the name I bear—that I owe my escape from being arrested. Appearances were against me—terribly so. But you shall judge. As I entered her house, the murderer had just gone."

"And you did not seize him?"

"I did not see him."

"But you went and gave information of the crime. That was quite right."

"No; I feared exactly what you fear. I feared being compromised, and I hoped that no one would know I had been there. I went away without telling a soul."

"But it was the height of folly. You must have known that all would be discovered."

"As a matter of fact, that is just what has happened. This morning at ten o'clock I underwent a long examination by a police commissary."

"You cleared yourself, I presume?"

"I told everything, as I am about to tell you. I omitted nothing and extenuated nothing. I would sooner have been condemned—even by you—than told a lie. And it was the frankness of my explanation which impelled the commissary to let me go free."

"You are my nephew, and you have narrowly escaped being arrested like a thief!" said the old gentleman bitterly.

"He let me go free, with certain restrictions," continued George, imperturbably. "I had to give a promise to appear if called upon, and, in addition to that, I am watched."

"Watched! what do you mean by that, sir?"

"Do you see that man there pretending to look into a shop window?"

"Yes. Why, you don't mean to say—!"

"He's a detective whom the commissary attached to my person."

"This is too much!" cried the count, crimson with passion; "you dare to come and ask for me at my club, dragging at your heels a detective, a spy! Be off, sir. Let me pass, and never cross my path again."

"Excuse me, uncle, you will never see me again—I swear it—but I swear also that you shall not leave me without hearing me to the end. If you are afraid of a member of your club passing and seeing you with me, let us go further along. The man is broken in to his trade, and knows what he's about. No one will notice that he is following us."

"Very well; get it over quickly," replied the count, walking quickly towards the Madeleine. "What more have you to say to me? What fresh disgrace are you going to tell me of? Speak, sir, I am prepared for anything."

"Except for what I am going to tell you, without hesitating, and without keeping anything back, cost me what it may. You were present yesterday morning at the scene which that man whom you paid caused?"

"Yes, sir, and I am surprised that you did not demand satisfaction from the scamp."

"I did demand it. I fight him to-morrow."

"Ah!" said the count, rather more moved by this statement than he was willing to show.

"And it is not only because Monsieur Daubrac grossly insulted me that I am fighting," continued George. "It is also, and especially, because he trifled with you."

"With me! What do you mean?"

"These are the facts. I have known this man for a long time, and did owe him, in fact, four thousand francs, but only since the last few days. He knew that for the time being I was unable to repay the money, and he did not ask for it. I had met him yesterday on the Place de l'Opéra.

He had just seen you go into the Café Bignon. He told me that, if I would go and breakfast there, he would undertake to procure the two hundred louis that I owed him before two hours were over. I swear to you on my honour that he said nothing beyond this."

"What matter? Cut it short, sir. I don't care about prolonging this walk under the eyes of a detective."

"When I sat down opposite you I had not guessed Daubrac's plan, and when I replied to his insults in the way which you know, I was taking them seriously; I was not the accomplice in a vile comedy."

"A comedy! What?"

"He was playing one, but he was playing it alone. He knew you by reputation, and he had calculated that Count Roger de Gravigny would not allow his nephew to be publicly insulted without coming to his aid—not with his person, but with his money. He knew the terms on which we were, and that you would not take my part before strangers. But he judged that you would be eager to furnish me with the means to go out with him, and he was not mistaken."

"Then this farce had no other object than that of getting out of me the money that you owed him. I knew the man was a rogue; now I know he's a thief. You have queer friends, sir, but I can't help it, and I—"

"Wait, uncle. I haven't finished. This Daubrac, after having received the money that you had given him, waited for me on the boulevard in order to tell me what he had done. I treated him as he deserved, I can assure you. He laughed at my reproaches, and proposed to me to risk the two hundred louis at a game which was to be played at the club that night, to stake them, and divide equally the gains or losses."

"You refused, I should hope?"

"I accepted."

The count started, and brandished his walking-stick so suddenly, that he nearly knocked off the hat of a passer-by.

"Yes, I accepted," said George in a changed voice, "and I blush more for that act than for all the faults that I have committed since I was born. I forgot the name I bore. I deserve death, or exile for ever. If I am alive to-morrow night, I shall go to the other end of the world."

"You want to leave France?" said Count Roger. "You are quite right, it is the best thing you can do, and I am ready to facilitate your departure. Wherever you go, provided that it is far off, I will pay your passage, and when you arrive at your destination, you shall receive a sum which will be sufficient for your first wants."

"I thank you, uncle, and I accept," replied George. "I am tired of the life I am leading, and I want to have done with it as soon as possible. If I were to be killed to-morrow, it would be a good thing."

"No, for the rascal who swindled me yesterday would not receive the lesson he deserves."

"I'll do my best to give it him. But, whatever happens, I am going to ask you to put me in a position—not to repay him, that is done—but—"

"What! you have paid him! I thought you lost last night the money that he robbed me of; Prince Lounine told me that you left the place without a sou in your pocket."

"That is true. But I went back there and played again, and I won nearly fifty thousand francs. The prince knows nothing about that. He had gone."

"You won fifty thousand francs, and you come borrowing of me? It's a piece of impertinence."

"The fifty thousand francs don't belong to me."

"What do you mean? Did you play once more for the benefit of some scamp of the same description as Daubrac?"

"No; but in order to play again, I risked three hundred louis which were not mine; they had been entrusted to me."

"So," cried the count, "you abused the trust, and you calmly come and tell me that you have dishonoured yourself. You told me you were going to make a confession. I didn't think you were going to own to such infamies as these. But have you finished? I am prepared for anything now."

"Not for what I am going to tell you. This money was Madame Marly's."

"You took money from a prostitute! Well, that crowns all!"

"Took—no. Yesterday, as she was dining with me, she asked me to take care of it, for a few hours. I refused. She forced me to take it."

"Really, sir, you must be joking. This story is ridiculous, and doesn't excuse you."

"It's not a story. I had no need to invent it. I had only to be silent. You would never have known what I had done, if I had not told you myself. And this is why I tell you. I won, and I want to hand over to Madame Marly's heirs the whole of my winnings."

"Praiseworthy delicacy, which comes rather too late. What would have happened if you had lost?"

"I should have blown my brains out," replied George, coolly.

"And because you have won, you think that it relieves you from the necessity of proceeding to that extreme. You think your good fortune has absolved you?"

"No. Not even in my own eyes. I have condemned myself, and have determined to expiate my crime. But, first of all, I must refund the money."

"What prevents you from doing that?"

"Four thousand francs are wanting."

"What! you touched this money! Instead of restoring it immediately to the lawful owner, you made use of part of it? What did you do with it? And how have you managed to get rid of two hundred louis in a few hours?"

"I paid a debt."

"What a strange idea for you, who are loaded with them. The creditor whom you should have repaid first of all, was the unfortunate creature who had entrusted to you the six thousand francs. You say yourself that the gain resulting from stakes which belonged to her was hers entirely, and I approve the intention which you announced to me just now. Why did you not carry it out?"

"Because I was determined to fight that wretch Daubrac. If I had not paid him what I owed him, he would have had the right to refuse to meet me. I paid him, and in doing so, I threw the notes in his face. I did this on the boulevards, before a score of people, of whom one knew him, and another witnessed the scene in the Café Bignon yesterday. Now the duel is inevitable."

"Those kind of men don't fight."

"You are mistaken; Daubrac has fought, and he will fight again. His seconds have called on me."

"Who are yours?" asked Count Roger in a much milder tone.

"I have none yet. I am looking for some now."

"And can find none. Viscount de Gravigny will be reduced to ask this service of the first two non-commissioned officers that he meets."

"That is just what I shall do, if none of my friends will help me."

"You have some friends still, then?"

"I hope so," replied George, looking hard at his uncle,

who was vainly trying to hide the emotion he felt. The old gentleman was so moved, that he had begun to speak to his nephew, as he had done years ago.

"If I am wrong," continued George, "I shall go, on leaving you, to the Pépinière barracks, for I am determined to have done with this man to-morrow morning. I forgot to tell you," he added, "that I owe it to him to have been suspected. He almost informed against me to the police commissary."

"How almost?"

"Yes. His gossiping informed the commissary that Madame Marly was expecting me last night."

"What a venomous rascal! If you don't oblige him with a good thrust, I'll undertake to give him one myself."

"That would be doing him too great an honour. Besides, this affair concerns me alone."

"I can't admit that. He insulted me most outrageously, and I have every right to demand satisfaction," said Count Roger, eagerly. "But that's not the question now. You want four thousand francs to make up the fifty that you owed Madame Marly?"

"Yes, uncle."

"And you have the remainder at home?"

"I have it here."

"Good. How shall you find out this woman's heirs?"

"I can't tell yet. You are quite right in thinking I don't know them, and I have no time to discover them. I propose handing the money over to the commissary. He knows all about the affair, and he will undertake to hand them over to the rightful owners."

"What! he knows that you gambled with Madame Marly's money?"

"I concealed nothing from him."

"And he didn't see in that a proof against you! He let you go free!"

"Under certain conditions, as you see," said George, pointing out to his uncle the detective, who was strolling along ten paces behind them.

"Just so, I forgot you had the police on your track. This spy business must cease—I'll see the commissary, and —Have you made up your mind to leave the country?"

"I shall start to-morrow night, if you like."

"Very well, very well—then keep the money you have in your pocket."

"Madame Marly's money?—I sha'n't do that."

"Yes, and I'll pay a similar sum to those who have a right to it."

"You!" cried George, his face changing.

This was the first time that he had betrayed any mark of real feeling, since the beginning of the terrible affair in which he had become involved. Claudine's tragic death had seen him unmoved. The commissary's questions had not troubled him; his uncle's generosity touched him, because he saw the old gentleman was going to forgive him.

"Yes, yes," replied the count. "I have the weakness to believe that you are sorry and that you will keep your word, if you give me it. Swear to me to atone for the life you have been leading for the last ten years. Swear to me that I shall never again have reason to blush for you."

"I swear it," replied George, with cool firmness.

"That's enough for me. When are you to meet this rascal's seconds again?"

"They'll call on me again at five o'clock this afternoon."

"Well, send them to me."

"What? you consent to—"

"To see you through it. Yes. I have my reasons for wishing to do so. Have you any objection to my taking Prince Lounine for my colleague?"

"None," said George, after thinking for a moment.

"He is a foreigner. That is what we want; and I'm certain that he'll consent. Tell Daubrac's seconds to call for us at the Union, and await me at your place at ten o'clock to-night. All shall be settled for to-morrow morning —good-bye."

Saying this the count turned on his heel, without holding out his hand to George, although he was dying to do so, and went back into the club. George did not attempt to keep him. He was so overcome that he was anxious to get back to his rooms and think matters over, and he was about to get into a cab which was on the rank near him, when the detective who had quietly come up to him, said in a whisper:

"Excuse me, sir; but I must warn you that if you get into a cab I must do the same, unless you prefer me to ride on the box. I'll do that much for you, although it is against my instructions, if you like, but I don't think it would be advisable. The driver would know at once that you were being watched."

George had completely forgotten the man whom the commissary had attached to his person, and, on seeing him at his heels, he could not restrain a feeling of anger.

"Am I condemned to bear your unpleasant company night and day?" he asked in a dry voice. "Let them arrest me, if they dare; but if they don't want to go as far as that, let them leave me alone altogether. The liberty that I got would only be a farce if you continued to follow me indefinitely."

"Sir," replied the detective, unconcernedly, "it is not to me that you should talk like that. I am only carrying out an order given by my chief, and you'll do me the justice to allow that I have done it as pleasantly as I could. You must have seen just now that I did not interfere with you whilst you were talking to that old gentleman, who looks

like a gallant man and a gentleman. I'm certain he never noticed I was here."

"Well, how far will this persecution go? What instructions have you received?"

"My orders are, not to lose sight of you—that is to say, I haven't been commanded to mount guard in your house nor to follow you when you go into anyone else's, unless it's a house with two entrances, and there are no houses of that kind about here. But when you're walking about the streets I must follow you. So, you see, if you take a cab I can't run behind. I can do the double, too; I served ten years in the Line. But you might happen on a good horse, and then I should be left behind. The same thing if you got into a train; I should be obliged to make the journey with you, and as the department doesn't furnish us with money for travelling expenses I should show my card to the stationmaster, which would be unpleasant for you."

"Why not take another cab and follow me? I'll pay your fare."

"I'm forbidden to accept money, and that would be the same as if you gave it me."

Whilst the detective was giving his explanation, George had a look at him, and he saw that the man had a good face. An old soldier's face, rough, but honest. And moreover he was not dressed in the style of the legendary *Ratapoils* of the Second Empire. No one would have taken him for a detective; he looked more like a pensioner. And George de Gravigny came to the conclusion that it would be better to be on good terms with the man who was to stick as close to him as his own shadow and who did not seem a bad kind of fellow. It was possible even that the viscount might get some useful hints out of him for his guidance; that he would get to know, for instance, up to what point he would

be at liberty in his movements whilst the supervision lasted, and whether that were likely to be long.

"Very well," said he, after a moment's reflection, "get into the cab with me. I prefer it so. Those who see me will think I'm with some friend."

"Just as you like, sir," replied the detective.

And he opened the door of a cab which was standing by the side of the broad footpath of the Boulevard de la Madeleine. This act of politeness was principally intended to make George get in first, following the invariable tactics of the force. The man who comes last may decamp without it being noticed immediately. Accordingly, the police are the politest folks in the world. They always give way to those whom they are with, even should they be taking them off to prison. After having given the driver his address, George got in without further ado, and the detective took his place on his left hand with his quiet and almost respectful manner.

"You have been a soldier?" asked the viscount, who had determined to take the trouble to be conciliatory.

"Yes, sir; for fourteen years. I was a sergeant when I left."

"What is your name?"

"Etienne-Jean Pigache."

"It's just as well I should know it, as we are to live side by side until further orders."

"I don't think it'll be for long."

"Who knows? Perhaps till they've discovered the murderer. Do you think they'll find him?"

"That depends. A comrade who spoke to me just now, as I was loitering about the door of your house, told me that Ernest Maubert had proved an *alibi*."

"The maid's lover. Then they've found him?"

"Oh, yes, before twelve o'clock. Those kind of fellows

are never difficult to nab. We know their haunts. Maubert was taken on the Boulevard Rochechouart. He did not try to conceal himself, and yet he knew of the Rue de l'Arcade business. His woman had told him of it, for she'd seen him since. The commissary asked him what he had done from twelve o'clock till half-past three in the morning. He told all, without bothering himself."

"He lied probably."

"No, it was found to be right. He admitted that he had been to Madame Marly's rooms and had lighted a pipe there, a proof that Madame Marly hadn't come in. But he said that afterwards he had gone to a public-house in the Faubourg Montmartre, to meet a girl who walks the boulevards and who gives him money. Ah, he's a fellow that doesn't blush over his trade. This was found to be true. He stopped there till two o'clock; twenty people saw them there and the landlord has deposed to it. He left the place with the girl and they wandered about together from public to public till three o'clock. There are some of them where they close the front at the regulation time, and where you can get in just the same by the back. All this has been proved by witnesses. He's as well known as the tax-collector in that neighbourhood and a good many others. At three o'clock he parted with his second woman in the Rue de Maubeuge—that's where she lives; at a quarter or twenty minutes past three he arrived at the gambling saloon with one louis that she had given him and three that he had taken from Olga's bedroom. He's a nice scamp, but it wasn't him that murdered Madame Marly."

"Then he has been released?" said George eagerly, whom these details interested vastly.

"Not yet. They're going to take advantage of the opportunity to give him a taste of the lock-up. But he'll have to be released, and it's a pity, for if they could only rid

Paris of these vermin that live on women, ours wouldn't be such a tough job, for, look you, sir, when there's a crime committed it's almost a certainty that there's one of them in it. It's only a question of looking through the heap."

"Well, but Madame Marly didn't cut her own throat. Someone murdered her. How is it that they're not on the culprit's track? It wasn't the maid—"

"No, I'll answer for that. That sort doesn't do anything in that line."

"It wasn't her lover, as it appears. Do you think it was I?"

"No, sir, and the commissary doesn't think so either. If he had he would have sent you to the Dépot. He gave orders to watch you, because at the opening of an inquiry everyone must be watched, but that proves nothing against you."

"But it's a good deal too bad. This commissary is paid to discover criminals. Why doesn't he discover this one?"

"If they haven't found anyone yet it's because they haven't looked well."

"How so?" asked George, quickly.

"Ah, there you are. I have my opinion about the affair. But it's no business of mine to teach my superiors their business. And that's the reason why I keep my opinion to myself."

"You might tell me it."

"That would be against rules. If I carried out my orders strictly I should have nothing to say to you at all."

"No one will know. And I promise not to mention to anyone what you tell me."

"Oh, what I can tell you is no great matter, and I'm not sure that I'm not wrong. But I believe it's an amateur's job."

"What do you mean by that?"

"That it was done by someone who wasn't used to it. In the first place, nothing was stolen. The strong-box is intact. The key that opens it was on the night-table. It was not used. The jewellery was in a case where Madame Marly put it every night when she went to bed. My comrade told me so."

"The murder was committed out of revenge, then?"

"Well, such a thing has been known before. A lover who's turned out to make room for another isn't over pleased; and when he's a bad lot he may go to extremes."

George trembled. Paul Salers's name was on his lips, but he refrained from uttering it. Although he had a great dislike for his predecessor he could hardly persuade himself that this well-conducted capitalist had repaid Claudine's treason with the knife.

"They might make a search in the house," continued the detective. "It's inhabited by respectable people, but that's nothing. We're just going past it. Look! there's someone on Madame Marly's balcony."

In order to go from the Boulevard de la Madeleine to the Rue Neuve des Mathurins the driver had taken the Rue de l'Arcade. It was the nearest way, for George lived almost at the corner of the Rue d'Anjou. He could not look without a certain feeling of emotion at this house which still contained the unfortunate Claudine's body. He leant out of the window and saw that the detective was right. On Madame Marly's balcony were three men who seemed to be making investigations. A crowd had collected on the pavement, and people were looking out of their windows. The whole neighbourhood knew that a crime had been committed and that the law had been set in motion.

"Look," said Pigache, "they're examining the stonework and the railings of the balcony. They want to see whether anyone can have climbed up there. What a funny idea of

theirs! The street isn't as frequented as the boulevards, but if anyone had amused himself by clambering up to the first floor by a ladder or a knotted rope, someone would have seen him, no matter what time of night it was."

"Those gentlemen are from the Prefecture of Police, I suppose?" asked the viscount.

"The short one—the one that's stooping to pick up something—is the Chief of the Detective Department. The one on his right is the commissary who examined you this morning. The other one must be the magistrate—yes, yes, I recognize him now, and you're lucky to have to do with him. He's the right sort."

"What do you mean by the 'right sort'?"

"I mean to say that he doesn't allow himself to be led away by blarney; that he goes right to the facts. There are some unfortunately who listen to all they're told and waste their time over a lot of nonsense. This man knows how to use his wits. With just a scrap of information, he'll make out the affair just as it happened. And, besides that, he hasn't his equal at getting the truth out of a prisoner."

"Then I pity the prisoners who fall into his hands, when appearances are against them."

"Oh, he isn't led away by that, and he's a good judge of a man. He'd have released you at once."

The Viscount de Gravigny was not insensible to the compliment contained in this appreciation of his case by one of the profession, and he congratulated himself for not having ridden the high horse over this detective who was so well disposed towards him. The cab rolled along, and had already passed the scene of the crime. A few yards more and they arrived at their destination.

"I'm going in," said George. "I'm expecting callers and I sha'n't go out till dinner-time. What are you going to do? Wait for me at the door?"

"Those are my orders, sir; but rest easy, I sha'n't make myself conspicuous. On the other side of the street, just opposite, there's a public-house where I shall go and have a glass, and make it last a long time. By sitting at a table in front of the door I shall see you go in and out as well as if I were in the street, and no one will notice me."

"And when I go to dinner?"

"I shall follow you at fifteen paces, and I shall mount guard outside the restaurant where you go."

"Take care. All that I go to have two doors."

"I know that, but I'm certain you won't try to escape. You have too much sense not to know that it wouldn't do you any good. My business is not to lose you, and the way I go about it is my concern. I'm responsible. If you took advantage of me I should be dismissed, and I want my place to earn my living. You wouldn't ruin a man who has a wife and children."

"Certainly not; and as you are so reasonable I'll tell you where I'm intending to go to-morrow."

"So long as it's not outside Paris, that's all that's necessary."

"I shall go out of Paris."

"The deuce! Then I shall be forced to—"

"I am going to Montmorency, to Vincennes, or to Meudon. I don't know quite which."

"I see what's up. You're going to fight a duel."

"You have guessed rightly, and I hope you won't prevent me."

"I have no orders. My chief had not foreseen that."

"I don't suppose it happens often," said Monsieur de Gravigny, smiling.

"No, I've been in the force twelve years, and it's the first time I've known such a case."

"Then you'll let me fight?"

"On condition that I am there, yes."

"I've no objection to that. Only I wonder what my opponent and his seconds will say when they see you."

"Oh, I'll arrange it so that I don't alarm them. I'll look on from a distance. Or if you like you can tell them that I'm a fencing-master in the army, and that you brought me to see that things went on properly. You won't be far from the truth. I was provost-marshal for seven years in the 19th Chasseurs."

"I hope we sha'n't get as far as that. But I count on your promise, for I must fight."

"It's a serious matter, then?"

"As serious as can be," replied the viscount, without being annoyed at being familiarly questioned by a man to whom, an hour before, he would have blushed to speak. "I want to kill a scoundrel who has insulted me. And the fight will continue until one of us falls."

"I hope it'll be the other one," cried the detective; "but here we are at your house, sir. I'll get out on the other side, so that your doorkeeper sha'n't see me."

And he executed this manœuvre so expeditiously that Monsieur de Gravigny had not time to thank him for his thoughtfulness. The viscount got out, paid the driver, and entered his house, not without noting that the worthy Pigache had taken up his position so far from the gate that no one would have imagined that he was exercising his functions. As he was passing the doorkeeper's lodge the latter came out and informed him in a confidential voice that a lady was waiting for him. George took in the situation at once. At the time of his acquaintance with Madame de Benserade, the rash marchioness used simply to get the key from the doorkeeper when her lover was not in, and unceremoniously instal herself in his rooms, much to his amusement. But all that was over. The break-off was final, although it

only dated from the day before, and it had been a violent one. What did his late mistress want with him, and how was it that she had allowed herself to enter his rooms just as before?

The thought of her had not entered his mind during the last four and twenty hours, in the midst of the strange events which had happened, and he had fondly hoped never to see her again, for he knew her too well to think that she would come once more to entreat him to fly with her and so humiliate herself in the eyes of a faithless lover, who had almost driven her away after having betrayed her. But he remembered all at once that she could not be ignorant of her rival's death, and he came to the conclusion that her unexpected visit was prompted by that tragic event. Perhaps Madame de Benserade had learnt that George was suspected, and she wanted to hear from his own lips what amount of truth there was in the rumours which were flying about. After what had passed between them the proceeding was, to say the least, a trifle strange. But one could never be certain what the eccentric marchioness's next step would be. George, who felt uneasy, and almost alarmed, ran up the stairs four steps at a time. He had his own key with him, and he entered the room quickly. He found Madame de Benserade standing against the fireplace in the first room of his bachelor's quarters, which consisted of a smoking-room, a dressing-room, and a bedroom.

"You here, madame?" said he, frowning.

"You knew I was here," replied the marchioness. "They must have told you that a woman had taken your key.'

"Yes, and I knew it was you, but I don't know what you've come for."

"You didn't guess?"

"Certainly not."

The marchioness trembled. She had not raised her veil,

and George could not see her face; but, by her attitude, he saw that she was in a state of intense agitation.

"You have no heart, then?" she continued in a shaking voice.

A ring at the bell, which resounded through the house, prevented George from replying to this attack, and made Madame de Benserade turn pale.

"Is it a fresh mistress that you're expecting?" she asked, taking a step forward.

"I'm not expecting anyone," said George, firmly, "but I shall open the door."

"You must not do that," cried the marchioness.

A second ring, more violent than the first, announced that the visitor insisted on being admitted.

"I can't help it," said George.

"Why?"

"I'm expecting someone whom I'm forced to see. You must know that since this morning I have been in a peculiar position."

"And you must know that I don't want anyone to find me here."

"There's no reason why you should not go into my bedroom."

Madame de Benserade hesitated for an instant. This bedroom, where formerly she had been so much at home, reminded her of the past, and she remembered that George had driven her from it. But the bell rang louder still, or rather it was not a ring but a peal.

"Very well," said she. "I will shut myself in there. You know that the partition is very thin and that I shall hear all that goes on."

"That matters little to me," replied Monsieur de Gravigny, "I've nothing to hide from you now"

The marchioness gave him a look which said more than

words, and went into the bedroom. As soon as she had shot the bolt, George ran to the front door, where the visitor continued ringing furiously. He opened it, and stood aghast on finding himself face to face with the Marquis de Benserade.

"You have kept me waiting a long time, sir," said the husband, who looked like the Commander interrupting Don Juan's supper.

"If I had known it was you ringing, I should have hurried more," replied Viscount de Gravigny, drily. And he stepped aside to allow the threatening visitor, who arrived so inopportunely, to pass. Monsieur de Benserade walked on into the smoking-room without saying a word, and without even taking off his hat. When he had taken up his position by the fireplace, on the spot where his wife had stood a moment before, he decided, however, on doing so, and started the conversation with these words:

"The woman Marly, whose lover you were, was murdered last night."

"I knew it," replied George. "What then?"

"You murdered her, didn't you?"

"Sir!"

"Oh, I know you deny it. But I have proofs of your guilt."

"Proofs? You are mad. Go and tell that to the commissary of police who examined me this morning—as a matter of form—and knows all about me."

"That is what I shall most assuredly do, if you refuse to fight me. I could send you to the galleys or the scaffold. I prefer to kill you. A man like myself doesn't run to the law to avenge himself, unless he has to deal with a coward."

"Avenge yourself? For what?"

"You have been my wife's lover."

"Really, sir, you've got jealousy on the brain. You've already brought this absurd accusation once, and I was good enough to take the trouble to clear myself. You withdrew it, in the face of certain facts. You are pleased to bring it again. I shall not refute it any more."

"So you dare to maintain still that you were not in my house when I came home."

"If I had been there you would have found me there. You know well enough that I was at Madame Marly's."

"Yes; you had time to escape by the window. You fell on that woman's balcony and she took you in, and when I pointed my revolver at you she said you were her lover, in order to save your life. It was a lie. You became her lover the same evening, to repay her for the falsehood. When I entered the house you were not there."

"You think that, out of pure generosity, in order to save Madame de Benserade whom she did not even know, Madame Marly quarrelled with Monsieur Salers, who made her a rich woman, sacrificing thus to your wife's reputation an acquaintance on which she had lived for three years?"

"No, she sacrificed it for you, you alone. She liked you. She suddenly took a fancy for you which almost amounted to a passion. She wanted to have you. She had you. She did not foresee that the lover of her choice would murder her the next day."

"Sir," said George coolly, having had time to collect himself; "I sha'n't undertake to rid you of the extravagant notions which haunt your brain. I repeat to you that I have never been Madame de Benserade's lover. You are quite at liberty to think the contrary. I owe you no satisfaction, and I shall not fight."

"I'll force you to do so."

"You might do so by publicly insulting me. But I should recommend you not to have recourse to that. All

Paris would say that you wanted to avenge a husband's honour. All Paris would be wrong, but your wife, who has nothing to reproach herself with, would get credit for having been my mistress."

"I have another means to force you to fight me."

"I am curious to know it."

"Well, listen to what I am going to say. The police are at the present moment in that wretched woman's rooms. They are in search of the culprit. They are gathering proofs. A little while ago they were examining the balcony by which you made your first entry—and they won't find anything. Your passage left no traces there, or, if it did, the wind and rain have effaced them during these two days. Therefore you will escape the chastisement of your crime, if I am silent. But I swear to you that I will not be silent, if this very day my seconds do not meet those whom you may choose to represent you."

"You won't be silent, you say? What do you know then?"

"The men who are seeking have not found the weapon which served to commit the murder. But *I* have found it."

"Do you pretend to say that the weapon belongs to me?"

"It does not belong to you, in this sense—that you did not buy it. You took it."

"From whom did I take it, and why?" asked George, ironically.

"You took it from me, you took it to defend yourself with."

"Then it's yours! And I went to your rooms to fetch it expressly to kill Madame Marly with! Really, sir, I think I'm in a dream when I hear such insanity proceed from your mouth"

"This is what you did. When I came home on the evening when I nearly caught you, being surprised to find no light in the corridor, I called one of my servants, and you recognised my voice. Your first thought was to arm yourself, and you took from off the chimneypiece of my wife's bedroom a steel stiletto with an ivory handle. Then you reflected that you had time to fly. You rushed into the drawing-room, you threw open the window, and escaped me. You took the precaution of keeping the stiletto. You still had it with you last night when you went to this woman's. You used it to murder her with. Why did you murder her? I don't know, and I don't wish to know. She was in the way, no doubt, of your continuing your adulterous intercourse with my wife. In her jealousy she may have made a scene, and you struck her in a fit of passion. It matters little to me.

"Before leaving the house you wanted to get rid of the weapon. I can understand that it must have inspired you with horror. You didn't think that it might be found, and you threw it down the stairs. It fell in the shade of the first step, and the police did not see it. But I saw it and I picked it up, an hour ago."

"You picked up a stiletto, but there is no proof that the murderer used it," stammered Monsieur de Gravigny, who well remembered having seen the weapon on Madame de Benserade's bedroom chimneypiece.

"Look at it," said the husband. "Your victim's blood has dried on the blade and stained the ivory handle."

George turned pale as Monsieur de Benserade showed him the weapon which had been plunged into the unfortunate Claudine's throat. He saw the beginning of a terrible drama, and it was not for himself that he was afraid.

"You recognise it, and you can't deny any longer," continued the marquis, energetically. "Either it was you who

made use of this weapon to murder a woman, or it was Madame de Benserade, and it is impossible to accuse her of having committed a horrible crime; it is impossible, not only because her position places her above such a suspicion, but also because I could prove, if necessary, that I accompanied her home that night, and that she did not leave my rooms afterwards."

"Have you told her of your find?" asked George, more and more uneasy.

"No, sir, I have not seen her, and I shall never see her again. However things turn out, Madame de Benserade will leave France. I shall inform her of my wishes, and she will obey, in order to escape the disgrace of divorce proceedings. I hope that you will not attempt to avoid giving the satisfaction which I demand; but if you decline to meet me, I swear to you on my honour that I will go and hand over this weapon to the police, and will denounce you as the murderer."

"You will say too that you discovered me in your wife's bedroom?"

"I shall tell all. My name will be disgraced, but I shall be avenged. It depends on you whether I am avenged in any way. If there is any feeling of honour left in you, if you have not completely forgotten that you were born a gentleman, you will not force me to denounce you."

"Sir," said George de Gravigny, after a short silence, "I protest once more against an absurd accusation, and, if it only rested with me, I declare to you that I would let you say and do anything which anger dictated: I should have no difficulty in proving that you have foolishly calumniated me, and public opinion would condemn you. But if I did not arrest you in the headlong course into which you are plunging, Madame de Benserade would by your fault be placed in a terrible position. She would have no other

alternative than to lie, in saying that I was her lover, or in confessing that she murdered Madame Marly. For if this stiletto served, as you say, to commit the crime, the murderer is either she or I. I wish to spare this torture to a woman whom I respect, much more than you respect her yourself. I consent therefore to fight you."

"At last!" cried the husband, "I shall have the consolation of killing you. We will fight to-morrow morning, and I will send you my seconds now. I have no need to add that I shall not tell them the cause of the duel. I shall invent a pretext. I will tell them, if you like, that you insulted me yesterday on coming out of the Café Anglais."

"Certainly, sir. But the meeting cannot take place in the morning."

"Why not?"

"Because to-morrow morning I am fighting another opponent."

"He can wait. I'll admit neither subterfuges nor delay. We'll go out to-morrow before twelve o'clock, or I'll hand this stiletto over to the police. Choose!"

George shook with rage. The demands of this furious Sganarelle were intolerable. But how avoid them? He would not at any price allow him to put his threat into execution. And after all Daubrac could easily put up with a wait of four-and-twenty hours. He was not in such a hurry as this husband to cut Monsieur de Gravigny's throat.

"Very well, sir," replied the viscount, after a moment's reflection. "I'll manage it. Send me your seconds. Only, you must allow me to choose mine as I like. I prefer not to avail myself of the services of men of my own rank, and I recommend you to do the same, if you wish to avoid a scandal."

"I shall choose two breeders whom I meet every year at the Horse Show. They know me very slightly, and you

not at all, but I'm certain they won't refuse to assist me. You can choose whom you will. But I expect everything to be arranged this evening."

"I shall not leave home, except to go to dinner from seven to nine."

"That will do, sir," said Monsieur de Benserade, walking towards the door.

George was glad to show him out. There was nothing more to be got out of this madman, and he was dying to have an explanation with another person. He watched the marquis rush downstairs and returned quickly to the smoking-room. There he found Madame de Benserade. She had raised her veil and she looked at him with ardent gaze.

"I have heard all," she said, in a hollow voice.

"So much the better," replied George, hardly able to contain himself, "then perhaps you will explain to me—"

"You shall not fight," interrupted the marchioness; "I will not allow you to fight."

"You won't allow me! and do you think your wish is sufficient to withhold me? What right have you to dictate to me? There is nothing in common with us now, as you must know."

"I do not command; I implore, I entreat—"

"What did you come to ask of me?"

"To fly with me."

"Again!" cried George, remembering the scene of the day before.

"Yesterday," continued Madame de Benserade, slowly, "I said that I was prepared to pardon you, and that my only wish was to devote my life to you. You repulsed me. But yesterday there was an obstacle between us. Now nothing separates us. That unhappy woman is dead. They accuse you of having murdered her; and—"

"And you know well that it is not true."

"Yes, I know it—but—if it was true—I should not on that account cease to love you."

"You love me, you say! This is a nice time to talk to me about your love. You would do better to think of the fate which awaits both of us, whatever happens. If your husband kills me to-morrow, he will drive you away; you know that, since you have heard all. If I kill him, your lot will be no better. Do you think I would consent to be his widow's lover? If I was coward enough to see you again, I should despise myself. Do not ask me why. *I* don't ask you what you have done, and I do not wish to know. Be satisfied with my refusal without forcing me to explain to you why all is at an end between us for ever."

"So you love me no longer?—you will never love me again?"

"I hate you," cried George, exasperated. "And do not force me to tell you that to the hatred with which you fill me there is added a fresh feeling—"

"Go on," interrupted the marchioness, whose face, from being pale, had become livid; "that feeling is disgust, is it not? Offend me, insult me, break my heart. I deserve the punishment for having thought that you would never lower yourself to mating with a prostitute—"

"You dare to speak of her thus! you who—"

"Ah! since you defend her still, you must have loved her. I did well to kill her."

"You confess that you did it!"

"Yes, I did it. Hadn't you guessed it?" asked Madame de Benserade, with terrible calmness. "Didn't you recognise the stiletto? Have you forgotten that one evening, in the days when you swore you were mine, mine alone, I told you I would pierce your heart with it if you deceived me? Well, it was not you I struck. My hand would have trembled. I did not tremble when I laid open the throat of the

woman who had stolen my love from me, and had insulted me only a few hours before dying."

"But it's impossible," stammered George, "you could not get into her rooms."

"You showed me the way the night before."

"The balcony!"

"Yes, the balcony. Ah! you thought because I was light-hearted, because I ran after pleasure, you thought I had neither passions nor strength of mind. I will tell you, then, what I did and why I did it. Yesterday, after the scene of the night before, I pictured to myself that she had saved us. I wanted to see her to thank her. Then she threw it in my face that you were her lover, and that she intended to keep you. And when I told her that I did not feel inclined to give you up, she threatened to betray me to my husband; she defied me, and, in order to provoke me, she told me that you were going to pass the night with her, that she had given you her key, and that you would come to her when you left the club. She did not think that in talking thus she was pronouncing her own death-decree. I condemned her to death; I swore to myself that I would kill her with my own hand. How? I did not know it yet, and perhaps my courage would have failed me; but that evening I saw you together—you were coming out of the Café Anglais; you had dined in the room in which I had given myself to you for the first time. It was too much! I could not bear that this vile rival should live. If I had met her that evening, I would have stabbed her in the street. Chance provided me with the means that I sought for of getting into her rooms. On arriving at the Rue de l'Arcade, I looked up and saw that her drawing-room window was open, and I remembered that you had gone in through it; I could do so too. I went in, and as soon as I was alone I went to my window; I awaited your mistress's return; I

saw her come home in a cab; I waited till she was in bed; I fastened a sheet to the window-bar—the street was deserted—no one saw me slipping down the sheet, which I had twisted like a rope; I glided into the drawing-room where she had insulted me; I held the stiletto in my hand; I should have liked her to awake, so that she could have seen me coming to kill her; she was asleep; I got to her bedside without her moving."

"And you murdered her!"

"I thought of you whom she had taken from me. I killed her with one blow. I came back into the drawing-room; I went out, and as I was hurrying upstairs the weapon slipped from my hand; I did not waste time in going down two flights to pick it up. I had the key of my own rooms; I entered them noiselessly, and pulled up the sheet which was hanging from the window."

"And you calmly wiped off the blood which stained your hands!"

"It was because I loved you that I killed her," said the marchioness.

"Away, wretch!" cried George. "You fill me with horror."

IX.

George de Gravigny got up before daylight. It cost him no effort to be astir so soon, for he had hardly closed an eye all night, although he had gone to bed early. He knows that it is a good thing to get plenty of rest when one has to fight a duel the next morning. He has fought many a one before, and, before doing so, he always slept as Condé slept before a battle. But on this occasion sleep forsook his eyelids, although the anxiety of a near and dangerous encounter weighed little with him. He does not fear death; he almost longs for it, though firmly resolved to die hard. The future terrifies him, the past oppresses him. To say that he feels any remorse would be too much, but he repents, and for a man like him repentance is bitter. He has revived the whole of his past life and confesses to himself that he took the wrong way. The flower-strewed pathways of Bohemia have led him to the edge of a precipice. For the last four-and-twenty hours the Viscount de Gravigny has been sliding down a terrible slope. He has been suspected of being a murderer, and he knows now that that murderer was the woman whom he had loved. He did not kill Claudine, but it was on his account that she was killed. And he cannot avenge her; he cannot hand Madame de Benserade over to justice. She has confessed her crime, and that crime is a fearful one. The marchioness is a monster, but she has been his mistress. He is doomed to be silent and to venture his life against that of

the husband whom she has deceived. So goes the world in which he was born, and that world would turn on him if he betrayed her. People would say he was a coward, and the honest fool who gave this woman his name would despise him. At least he has driven her away, and he is firmly determined never to see her again. She left him mad with love, almost furious with passion. She left him, cursing him, defying him to tell the truth, and threatening him with her vengeance if he returns from the combat which is awaiting him.

Where has she gone? George knows not. Not to her husband certainly, for she heard all and knows that he would forbid her to enter his house if she showed her face there. But Paris is hospitable to women of her stamp. She has only the embarrassment of a choice between violent extremes. What does it matter, though, to the last of the Gravignys whether she stuffs her husband with lies and remains a marchioness, or whether she flaunts her shame in taking her place among the outcasts who enter into an unfair competition with prostitutes? She no longer exists for him, and he fears her not, for if she had the audacity to accuse him of the murder of Claudine, she would ruin herself. The ivory-handled stiletto is hers, and no judge would be simple enough to believe, like the credulous marquis, that George took it away from her without her noticing it. George, after the scene in the smoking-room, had plenty of other causes for anxiety than that of wondering what Madame de Benserade was going to do. He passed the rest of the day in interviews with seconds, with those of Daubrac first of all, who came at five o'clock. He asked them to postpone the affair until the day but one after, under pretence that his own were not ready, and as Daubrac was in no particular hurry, this was arranged without any difficulty. Count Roger arrived at ten o'clock, and was not

a little surprised to find that George had accorded his opponent a delay. He had already come to an arrangement with Prince Lounine, who had gladly consented to second a Gravigny. The uncle understood that it was Monsieur Daubrac who asked for this short respite, and it was impossible to refuse him it. He did not guess what had really passed, and George took good care not to tell him. In order to tell him the truth he would have had to confide to him a secret which he swore to keep to himself. His uncle knows the Marquis de Benserade by name and sight; he would have wanted to know the reason of the duel, and would not have been put off by trifling reasons. His nephew would never have been able to convince him that he was going to fight because an old gentleman who was bordering on fifty had insulted him in the street. Count Roger had lived long enough to smell out a woman in this affair, and he would have demanded explanations which it was impossible to give him.

Between his visit and that of Daubrac's friends George had an interview with two honest countrymen sent by Monsieur de Benserade, two neighbours of the marquis, little acquainted with the rules generally followed in such cases and quite incapable of prying into the real reasons of the duel. They showed themselves very agreeable, consenting to everything that George proposed. He told them briefly that, not having had time to procure witnesses, and the duel being inevitable, he begged them to allow him to introduce to them on the field of battle the two friends whom he should bring. He added that he left the choice of weapons, time, and place to his opponent, and it was settled that the duel should take place at half-past ten on the borders of the pond at Ville d'Avray, and that the weapons should be sabres. Monsieur de Benserade, having served in the cavalry, had obtained a serious advantage in choosing

the sabre, but George, wishing to make an end of it, had raised no objection, and the interview had not lasted twenty minutes. It only remained for him to discover two good-natured men who would consent to figure in a duel without demanding the reason of that duel. This is not an easy thing, and it is customary in such cases to have recourse to the military. George, being able to think of no better plan, went out to try and beat up a couple at the nearest barracks, and naturally Pigache, who was awaiting him outside, followed him at a distance. But George did not succeed in his expedition in search of two makeshift seconds. The non-commissioned officers to whom he applied, all declined the honour which he wished to confer on them, and he knew not what to do next, when the ingenious detective came to his relief. He offered to bring him next morning two old soldiers of his acquaintance, who were used to such affairs and who would give their assistance in this one without any ado.

George accepted. He had no time to do better, and, moreover, he was not sorry to inflict on his opponent the presence of the lowest class of policeman and two worthy individuals totally devoid of ancestors. On getting out of bed, he began by writing a letter to his uncle, a letter which was to be given to him by Pigache in case of accident. He asked pardon for having fought without him; he begged him not to inquire into the reasons for his fighting Monsieur de Benserade; he reminded him that the sum which would be found in his pocket-book belonged to Claudine Marly's heirs, and he terminated this testamentary epistle by a few very simple words of adieu, which would certainly cause tears to flow from Count Roger's eyes, if the fate of war did not deprive him from seeing his nephew again.

It is nine o'clock, and they are to leave by the train at half-past. Pigache has just arrived. He had been to make

his report to his chief at twelve o'clock, and was exempted from night service. He was even told that his task would very probably conclude that day, and he hurried to communicate this news to his victim.

"Then, I'm no longer accused?" asked George. "Whom do they suspect?"

"No one," replied Pigache. "They're all astray, even the magistrate, who fancies that the assassin must have entered by the balcony. As if that was possible! They'll find out nothing, and it'll all end in smoke. In six months' time they'll think no more of the Rue de l'Arcade affair than they think now of the Passage Saulnier one. You remember, sir, that girl that was murdered with a Japanese dagger. That time they didn't even find the dagger, because the first work was badly done."

"Never mind that," interrupted George, whom this conversation worried.

"Where are the two friends you promised to bring?"

"They're waiting for us at the Saint-Lazare station. One of them has a good pair of sabres. I thought it best your doorkeeper shouldn't see them."

"That was right. Let's be off, we haven't a minute to lose, I don't want to miss the train."

Pigache never wasted words, and on all occasions he acted with military promptitude. He went off at his usual walk to take up his position in the street again, and, as soon as George appeared, to follow him as he had done the day before, at the regulation distance. Pigache did not want to be reproached for having neglected his duty. His orders were not to lose sight of Monsieur de Gravigny. In carrying out these instructions the detective had a right to get into a train with the gentleman he was watching, but he was not allowed to talk to him in the street. The two old troopers were at their post in the waiting-room, and really

their appearance was not at all bad. One was tall and lean, the other short and broad-shouldered. The tall one wore the ribbon of the military medal, the short one the Crimean and Italian. The introduction was soon accomplished, without ceremony or phrases. They all got into a compartment where there were other passengers, and did not speak a word during the journey. George did not care about talking before strangers of the motive of their expedition, and the conversation of Pigache's friends had no attraction for him.

Having arrived at the Ville d'Avray station they took an omnibus which set them down in front of an inn well known to Parisians, and almost on the banks of the lake celebrated by Corot's pictures. From there to the place of meeting the distance was very short. The Marquis de Benserade and his seconds were already walking about on the edge of the lake. They must have come by road, for George had not seen them in the train. They bowed to one another, and Monsieur de Benserade did not appear surprised at his opponent's companions. To tell the truth, however, the two provincials who accompanied him did not present a much better appearance than Pigache and his friends. Pigache had put on his Sunday coat, and his comrades, buttoned up to the chin, might, at a stretch, have been taken for retired officers. The only thing remaining to be done was to choose a lonely place where the duellists could carve one another without being disturbed.

"I know a good place not far from here," said Pigache's tall friend.

"Be good enough to show us the way there," replied the marquis, without suggesting introductions, which appeared to him useless. And, in truth, the usual formalities were quite superfluous in this case. What good was it for principals and seconds to indulge in polite phrases when one

has arranged beforehand all the conditions of a combat which was only to end on the death of one of the opponents? Monsieur de Benserade did not even inquire what Pigache George de Gravigny's third second, was doing there. Possibly he took him for a friend of this outcast viscount, who was no longer in a condition to choose his own friends. They set off to make the tour of the lake, at one end of which stands a convenient grove. The two old troopers formed the advance guard; George and Pigache came next, followed at a distance by the marquis and his friends, of whom one also carried a pair of sabres.

"That gentleman's pretty tough yet," said the detective, "but he isn't young, and he can't be very active. If you go to work properly you'll cut him in two like a carrot. Can you use a sabre?"

"No," replied the viscount. "I've had a few singlestick lessons."

"Well, it's the same thing. You've only got to swing your sword round as much as you can, so as to avoid thrusts. The old chap will soon get blown, and when you see his wrist failing him, rush at him, and go for his body. I know, too, a feint that almost always succeeds against a man who holds his point low. By drawing back the body and the right leg you avoid the cut, and before he has time to raise his sword you split his skull, but you must know something about using your sword to do it."

"I was shown it at the fencing-school. I'll try it, if I get a chance. Thanks for your information; I'll profit by it."

"What I tell you, sir, is in your own interest, and a bit in my own too, because, you see, if you were killed, I should know what to expect."

"What would happen to you then?"

"I should be dismissed within four and twenty hours. If on the other hand you kill the old chap, I shall get off

with a good rigging from my chief, or temporarily suspended. I had orders to watch you; I watched you as far as Ville d'Avray, and I wasn't supposed to know you'd gone there to fight. As long as you're there when they want you it's all right for me, but I'm responsible for your person, and if that didn't turn up, I should be in fault."

"That's quite right, and I don't want you to have to regret having done me a service. Will you, in case of accidents, take upon yourself to give my pocket-book to the only relation I have?"

"Yes, if you'll give it me now, for, you understand, if you were killed, I couldn't take upon myself to rummage your pockets."

"Here it is," said George, taking it from his pocket. "It contains a sealed envelope, addressed to my uncle, Count Roger de Gravigny. If I am killed, go to Paris at once, and, before leaving, go to Monsieur de Gravigny; give him this pocket-book from me. He will find in it a letter that I have just written, and he'll question you. Tell him all that has passed, without omitting or concealing anything. Tell him that you are a detective, that you were told off to watch me, and that you expect to be dismissed. I promise you that he will provide for you. But, to make certain, I'll write him a line on the envelope, to tell him what you have done."

"I'll do your commission, if it's needed," replied the detective, after a moment's reflection, "but I hope you'll do it yourself."

George wrote a few lines on the back of the large enclosure in which were the bank notes won with Claudine's money, and gave the whole to Pigache, who was becoming quite a confidant. Great crises draw men together. The road that the viscount's two seconds had taken ran round the pond, the lake, as they say at Ville d'Avray, and plunged

into the wood farther on. In summer the neighbourhood is almost as much frequented as the Champs Elysées; but it was at the end of December now, and they did not meet a soul. The good place mentioned by the old trooper was found to be a clearing which seemed to have been made expressly for the benefit of duellists. Firm and level underfoot, plenty of room, and, all around, bushes thick enough to protect the combatants from prying eyes.

The seconds had a short conference. There was only one question to decide; that of settling which sabres to use. They drew lots, and chance favoured Monsieur de Benserade. The two men took off their coats, and grasped their weapons. The tall trooper placed them facing one another. He had undertaken the management of the whole business, and had armed himself with an enormous bludgeon, which was intended to take the place of the bâton which fencing masters use in order to prevent foul strokes. The other trooper and Monsieur de Benserade's seconds contented themselves with playing the part of spectators. Pigache, who was accustomed to being on the watch, went and kept guard at the edge of the wood, to prevent interruption.

The marquis and George were superb in their resolute attitude, their bare chests, their confident look, sabre in hand, one apparently as calm as the other, although George's nerves were the more irritated.

The duel began instantly the word was given, and Monsieur de Benserade attacked. He knew well how to use the weapon that he had chosen, and his superior skill at once forced his opponent to remain on the defensive. George tried to put Pigache's advice into practice, and to take advantage of his lessons in singlestick; but he was attacked with such fury, that from the very first he felt that he was lost. The terrible marquis used nothing but the point; his

thrusts followed one another like lightning, and all Gravigny's efforts to parry them were vain. Pigache, who was looking on from a distance, and knew all about it, made frantic signs to his medalled comrade to interpose; he almost made up his mind to interfere in person, to put an end to the unequal combat.

But the viscount, exasperated at having the worst of it, determined to make an end. He took his sabre in both hands, and, exposing thus his chest, rushed, weapon aloft, on Monsieur de Benserade, who for his part took no trouble to parry.

The marquis fell, with his skull split, upon George, whom he had first pierced to the heart.

The lover had been killed on the spot. The husband was dying.

Louise Plantin, Marchioness de Benserade, was free, since she was a widow, and she knew well that George de Gravigny would never rise up against her and accuse her of the murder of Claudine Marly.

. . . . . .

She had not to bear the reprobation of the world, for the marquis carried to the grave with him the secret of his wife's shame. His seconds reported in perfect good faith that the duel had no other cause than some slight quarrel between two sensitive gentlemen.

Olga alone could have spoken; but Olga was only too happy to get off with two days' confinement, and she said not a word to compromise herself. Her Ernest was also liberated, and he advised her to keep her own counsel about the loves of George and the marchioness, and about the viscount's entry by the balcony.

Why make things awkward for a rich widow who will possibly reward their silence some day or other? But they

had no notion that she killed Claudine, otherwise they would make her pay dearly indeed for their silence.

The police are still investigating the Rue de l'Arcade murder. They may do so to their heart's content, but they will never discover the true culprit.

People have been given to understand that the deed may have been done by George de Gravigny, who is no longer there to defend himself. The commissary was soundly rated, and Pigache was dismissed.

But Pigache lost nothing thereby. The Count de Gravigny made him a keeper on one of his estates, and he is a terror to all poachers. The good count lamented his nephew, and did not fail to restore anonymously to Claudine's heirs the fifty thousand francs.

Daubrac lost two hundred louis by George's death, and he is not backward in insinuating that George was bound to come to a bad end. He takes good care to cross the street when he sees the old count approaching.

Prince Lounine is in despair at winning every time he touches a card. He is eagerly looking for a mistress who will bring him bad luck, and he ought not to have much difficulty in finding one. The Marchioness de Benserade has just begun to be seen about again, and is prettier than ever, for her deep mourning suits her marvellously well.

THE END.